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Abe Lincoln In McDonald's
James Morrow

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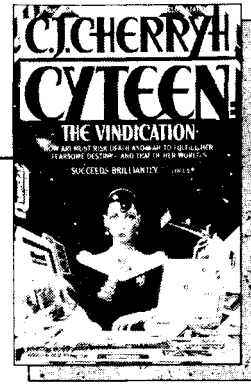


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## *A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen*

***I'm often asked to name my favorite books. Most of the time, I really don't have a definitive answer. There are always some authors whose latest books become instant reading requisites, like Robert Silverberg or Carolyn Cherryh. Occasionally I return for second or third readings of earlier works by authors such as Robert Heinlein, Harlan Ellison, or even Jules Verne, depending on my mood.***

***Reading is a major part of my job. But it's also what I do for enjoyment. I like to read, and to discuss books both new and old. I like to hear what other people think about books I enjoy. It's all part of the experience.***

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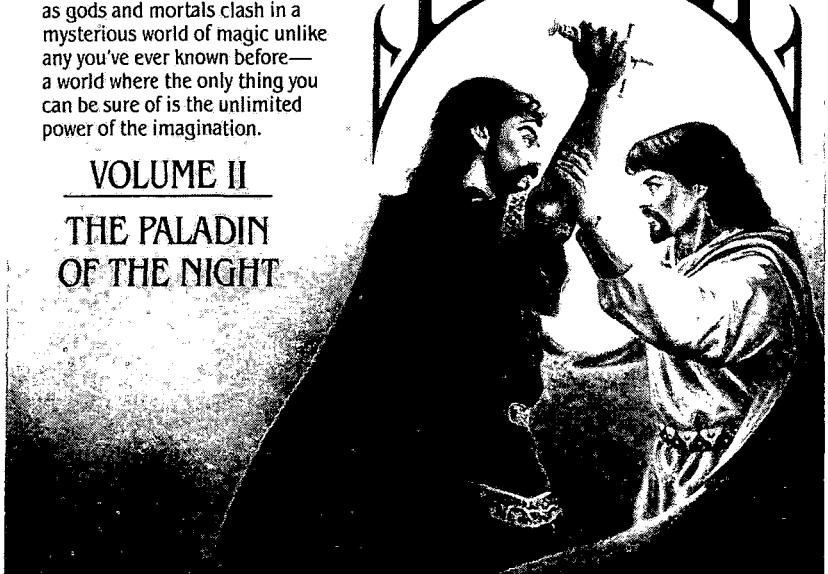

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 76, No. 5, Whole No. 456, May 1989. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annual subscription $21.00; $26.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1989 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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*The stereotypic time-traveler returns in time to confront a famous figure. James Morrow ("The Eye That Never Blinks" May 1988) reverses the stereotype to create an ironic and entertaining view of history. Here Abe Lincoln travels to the future in search of an answer and confronts an "average" man.*

# Abe Lincoln in McDonald's

**By James Morrow**

HE CAUGHT THE last train out of 1863 and got off at the blustery December of 2009, not far from Christmas, where he walked well past the turn of the decade and, without looking back, settled down in the fifth of July for a good look around. To be a mere tourist in this place would not suffice. No, he must get it under his skin, work it into his bones, enfold it with his soul.

In his vest pocket, pressed against his heart's grim cadence, lay the final draft of the dreadful Seward Treaty. He needed but to add his name —Jefferson Davis had already signed it on behalf of the secessionist states —and a cleft nation would become whole. A signature, that was all, a simple "A. Lincoln."

Adjusting his string tie, he waded into the chaos grinding and snorting down Pennsylvania Avenue and began his quest for a savings bank.

"The news isn't good," came Norman Grant's terrible announcement,

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stabbing from the phone like a poisoned dagger. "Jimmy's test was positive."

Walter Sherman's flabby, pumpkinlike face whitened with dread. "Are you sure?" *Positive*, what a paradoxical term, so ironic in its clinical denotations: nullity, disease, doom.

"We ran two separate blood tests, followed by a fluorescent antibody check. Sorry. Poor Jim's got Blue Nile Fever."

Walter groaned. Thank God his daughter was over at the Sheridans'. Jimmy had been Tanya's main Christmas present of three years ago — he came with a special note from Santa — and her affection for the old slave ran deep. Second father, she called him. Walter never could figure out why Tanya had asked for a sexagenarian and not a whelp like most kids wanted, but who could know the mind of a preschooler?

If only one of their others had caught the lousy virus. Jimmy wasn't the usual chore-boy. Indeed, when it came to cultivating a garden, washing a rug, or painting a house, he didn't know his nose from a nine of spades. Ah, but his bond with Tanya! Jimmy was her guardian, playmate, confidant, and, yes, her teacher; Walter never ceased marveling at the great discovery of the past century — how, if you chained a whelp to a computer at the right age (no younger than two, no older than six), he'd soak up vast tracts of knowledge and subsequently pass them on to your children. Through Jimmy and Jimmy alone, Tanya had learned a formidable amount of plane geometry, music theory, American history, and Greek before ever setting foot in kindergarten.

"Prognosis?"

The doctor sighed. "Blue Nile Fever follows a predictable course. In a year or so, Jimmy's T-cell defenses will collapse, leaving him prey to a hundred opportunistic infections. What worries me, of course, is Marge's pregnancy."

A dull dread crept through Walter's white flesh. "You mean — it could hurt the baby?"

"Well, there's this policy — the Centers for Disease Control urge permanent removal of Nile-positive chattel from all households containing pregnant women."

"Removed?" Walter echoed indignantly. "I thought it didn't cross the pigmentation barrier."

"That's probably true." Grant's voice descended several registers. "But

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*fetuses*, Walter, know what I'm saying? *Fetuses*, with their undeveloped immune systems. We don't want to ask for trouble, not with a retrovirus."

"God, this is depressing. You really think there's a risk?"

"I'll put it this way. If my wife were pregnant—"

"I know, I know."

"Bring Jimmy down here next week, and we'll take care of it. Quick. Painless. Is Tuesday at 2:30 good?"

Of course it was good. Walter had gone into orthodontics for the flexible hours, the dearth of authentic emergencies. That, and never having to pay for his own kids' braces. "See you then," he replied, laying a hand on his shattered heart.

The President strode out of Northeast Federal Savings and Loan and continued toward the derby-hatted Capitol. Such an exquisite building — at least some of the city remained intact, all was not glass-faced offices and dull, boxy banks. "If we were still on the gold standard, this would be a more normal transaction," the assistant manager, a fool named Meade, had whined when Abe presented his coins for conversion. Not on the gold standard! A Democrat's doing, no doubt.

Luckily, the White House soothsayer had prepared Abe for the wondrous monstrosities and wrenching innovations that now assailed his senses. The self-propelled railway coaches roaring along causeways of black stone. The sky-high mechanical condors whisking travelers across the nation at hundreds of miles per hour. The dense medley of honks, bleeps, and technological growls.

So Washington was indeed living in its proper century — but what of the nation at large?

Stripped to their waists, two slave teams were busily transforming Pennsylvania Avenue, the first chopping into the asphalt with pickaxes, the second filling the gorge with huge cylindrical pipes. Their sweat-speckled backs were free of gashes and scars — hardly a surprise, as the overseers carried no whips, merely queer one-chamber pistols and portable Gatling guns.

Among the clutter at the Constitution Avenue intersection — signs, trash receptacles, small landlocked lighthouses regulating the coaches' flow — a pair of green arrows commanded Abe's notice. *Capitol Building*, announced the eastward-pointing arrow. *Lincoln Memorial*, said its op-

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posite. His own memorial! So this particular tomorrow, the one fated by the awful Seward Treaty, would be kind to him.

The President hailed a cab. Removing his stovepipe hat, he wedged his six-foot-four frame into the passenger compartment — don't ride up front, the White House soothsayer had briefed him — and offered a cheery, "Good morning."

The driver, a blowsy woman, slid back a section of the soft rubbery glass. "Lincoln, right?" she called through the opening like Pyramus talking to Thisbe. "You're supposed to be Abe Lincoln. Costume party?"

"Republican."

"Where to?"

"Boston." If any city had let itself get mired in the past, Abe figured, that city would be Boston.

"Boston, *Massachusetts*?"

"Correct."

"Hey, that's crazy, Mac. You're talking five hours at least, and that's if we push the speed limit all the way. I'd have to charge you my return trip."

The President lifted a sack of money from his greatcoat. Even if backed only by good intentions, twentieth-century currency was aesthetically satisfying: that noble profile on the pennies, that handsome three-quarter view on the fives. As fas as he could tell, he and Washington were the only ones to score twice. "How much altogether?"

"You serious? Probably four hundred dollars."

Abe peeled the driver's price from his wad and passed the bills through the window. "Take me to Boston."

"They're so *adorable*!" Tanya exclaimed as she and Walter strolled past Sonny's Super Slaver, a Chestnut Hill Mall emporium second only in size to the sporting goods store. "Ah, look at *that* one — those big ears!" Recently weaned babies jammed the glass cages, tumbling over themselves, clutching stuffed jackhammers and toy garden hoses. "Could we get one, Pappy?"

As Walter fixed on his daughter's face, its glow nearly made him squint. "Tanya, I've got some bad news. Jimmy's real sick."

"Sick? He looks fine."

"It's Blue Nile, honey. He could die."

"Die?" Tanya's angelic face crinkled with the effort of fighting tears.

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What a brave little tomato she was. "Soon?"

"Soon." Walter's throat swelled like a broken ankle. "Tell you what. Let's go pick out a whelp right now. We'll have them put it aside until. . . ."

"Until Jimmy" — a wrenching gulp — "goes away?"

"Uh-huh."

"Poor Jimmy."

The sweet, bracing fragrance of newborn chattel wafted into Walter's nostrils as they approached the counter, behind which a wiry Oriental man, tongue pinned against his upper lip, methodically arranged a display of Tarbaby Treats. "Now *here's* a girl who needs a friend," he sang out, flashing Tanya a fake smile.

"Our best slave has Blue Nile," Walter explained, "and we wanted to —"

"Say no more." The clerk lifted his palms as if stopping traffic. "We can hold one for you clear till August."

"I'm afraid it won't be that long."

The clerk led them to a cage containing a solitary whelp chewing on a small plastic lawn mower. *Male,* the sign said. *Ten months. $399.95.* "This guy arrived only yesterday. You'll have him litter-trained in two weeks —this we guarantee."

"Had his shots?"

"You bet. The polio booster's due next month."

"Oh Daddy, I *love* him," Tanya gushed, jumping up and down. "I completely *love* him. Let's bring him home tonight!"

"No, tomato. Jimmy'd get jealous." Walter gave the clerk a wink and, simultaneously, a twenty. "See that he gets a couple of really good meals this weekend, right?"

"Sure thing."

"Pappy?"

"Yes, tomato?"

"When Jimmy dies, will he go to slave Heaven? Will he get to see his old friends?"

"Certainly."

"Like Buzzy?"

"He'll definitely see Buzzy."

A smile of intense pride leaped spontaneously to Walter's face. Buzzy had died when Tanya was only four, yet she remembered; she actually remembered!

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* * *

So hard-edged, the future, Abe thought, levering himself out of the taxi and unflexing his long, cramped limbs. Boston had become a thing of brick and rock, tar and glass, iron and steel. "Wait here," he told the driver.

He entered the public gardens. A truly lovely spot, he decided, sauntering past a slave team planting flower beds — impetuous tulips, swirling gladiolus, purse-lipped daffodils. Not far beyond, a white family cruised across a duck pond in a swan-shaped boat peddled by a scowling adolescent with skin like obsidian.

Leaving the park, he started down Boylston Street. A hundred yards away a burly Irish overseer stood beneath a gargantuan structure called the John Hancock Tower and began raising the scaffold, thus sending aloft a dozen slaves equipped with window-washing fluid. Dear Lord, what a job — the facade must contain a million square yards of mirrored glass.

Hard-edged, ungiving — and yet the city brought Abe peace.

In recent months he had started to grasp the true cause of the war. The issue, he realized, was not slavery. As with all things political, the issue was power. The rebel states had seceded because they despaired of ever seizing the helm of state; as long as its fate was linked to a grimy, uncooth, industrialized North, Dixie could never fully flower. By endeavoring to expand slavery into the territories, those southerners who hated the institution and those who loved it were speaking with a single tongue, saying, "The Republic's true destiny is manifest — an agrarian Utopia, now and forever."

But here was Boston, full of slaves and steeped in progress. Clearly, the Seward Treaty would not prove to be the recipe for feudalism and inertia that Abe's advisers feared. Crude, yes; morally ambiguous, true: and yet slavery wasn't dragging the Republic into the past, wasn't retarding its bid for modernity and might.

"Sign the treaty," an inner voice instructed Abe. "End the war."

Sunday was the Fourth of July, which meant the annual backyard picnic with the Burnsides, boring Ralph and boorish Helen, a tedious afternoon of horseshoe tossing, conspicuous drinking, and stupefying poolside chat, the whole ordeal relieved only by Libby's barbecued spareribs. Libby was one of those wonderful yard-sale items Marge had such a knack for finding, a healthy, well-mannered female who turned out to

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be a splendid cook, easily worth ten times her sticker price.

The Burnsides were an hour late — their rickshaw puller, Zippy, had broken his foot the day before, and so they were forced to use Bubbles, their unathletic gardener — a whole glorious hour of not hearing Ralph's views on the Boston sports scene. When they did finally show, the first thing out of Ralph's mouth was, "Is it a law the Sox can't own a decent pitcher? I mean, did they actually pass a *law*?", and Walter steeled himself. Luckily, Libby used a loose hand with the bourbon, and by three o'clock Walter was so anesthetized by mint juleps he could have floated happily through an amputation — not to mention Ralph's vapid views on the Sox, Celtics, and Patriots.

With the sixth drink, his numbness segued into a kind of contented courage, and he took unflinching stock of himself. Yes, his wife had probably bedded down with a couple of teachers from the Wellesley Adult Education Center — that superfluously muscled pottery instructor, most likely, though the drama coach also seemed to have a roving dick — but it wasn't as if Walter didn't occasionally use his orthodontic chair as a motel bed, wasn't as if he didn't frolic with Katie Mulligan every Wednesday afternoon at the West Newton Hot Tubs. And look at his splendid house, with its Jacuzzi, bowling alley, tennis court, and twenty-five-meter pool. Look at his thriving practice. His portfolio. Porsche. Silver rickshaw. Graceful daughter flopping through sterile turquoise waters (damn that Happy, always using too much chlorine). And look at his sturdy, handsome Marge, back-floating, her pregnancy rising from the deep end like a volcanic island. Walter was sure the kid was his. Eighty-five percent sure.

He'd achieved something in this life.

At dusk, while Happy set off the fireworks, the talk got around to Blue Nile. "We had Jimmy tested last week," Walter revealed, exhaling a small tornado of despair. "Positive."

"God, and you let him stay in the house?" wailed Ralph, fingering the grip of his Luger Parabellum PO8. A cardboard rocket screeched into the sky and became a dozen crimson starbursts, their reflections cruising across the pool like phosphorescent fish. "You should've told us. He might infect Bubbles."

"It's a pretty hard virus to contract," Walter retorted. A buzz bomb whistled overhead, annihilating itself in a glittery blue-and-red mandala. "There has to be an exchange of saliva or blood."

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"Still, I can't believe you're keeping him, with Marge pregnant and everything."

Ten fiery spheres popped from a roman candle and sailed into the night like clay pigeons. "Matter of fact, I've got an appointment with Grant on Monday."

"You know, Walter, if Jimmy were mine, I'd allow him a little dignity. I wouldn't take him to lousy clinic."

The piecè de résistance blossomed over the yard — Abe Lincoln's portrait in sparks. "What would you do?"

"You know perfectly well what I'd do."

Walter grimaced. Dignity. Ralph was right, by damn. Jimmy had served the family with devotion and zest. They owed him an honorable exit.

The President chomped into a Big Mac, reveling in the soggy sauces and sultry juices as they bathed his tongue and rolled down his gullet. Were he not permanently lodged elsewhere — rail-splitter, country lawyer, the whole captivating myth — he might well have wished to settle down here in 2010. Big Macs were a quality commodity. The whole menu, in fact — the large fries, vanilla shakes, Diet Cokes, and Chicken McNuggets — seemed to Abe a major improvement over nineteenth-century cuisine. And such a soothing environment, its every surface clean and sleek, as if carved from tepid ice.

An enormous clown named Ronald was emblazoned on the picture window. Outside, across the street, an elegant sign — Old English characters on whitewashed wood — heralded the Chestnut Hill Country Club. On the grassy slopes beyond, smooth and green like a billiard table, a curious event unfolded, men and women whacking balls into the air with sticks. When not employed, the sticks resided in cylindrical bags slung over the shoulders of sturdy male slaves.

"Excuse me, madam," Abe addressed the chubby woman in the next booth. "What are those men doing? Is it religious?"

"That's quite a convincing Lincoln you've got on." Hunched over a newspaper, the woman wielded a writing implement, using it to fill tiny squares with alphabet letters. "Are you serious? They're golfing."

"A game?"

"Uh-huh." The woman started on her second Quarter Pounder. "The game of golf."

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"It's like croquet, isn't it?"

"It's like golf."

Dipping and swelling like a verdant sea, the golf field put Abe in mind of Virginia's hilly provinces. Virginia, Lee's stronghold. A soft moan left the sixteenth President. Having thrown Hooker and Sedgwick back across the Rappahannock, Lee was ideally positioned to bring the war to the Union, either by attacking Washington directly or, more likely, by forming separate corps under Longstreet, Hill, and Ewell and invading Pennsylvania. Overrunning the border towns, he could probably cut the flow of reinforcements to Vicksburg while simultaneously equipping the Army of Northern Virginia for a push on the capital.

It was all too nightmarish to contemplate.

Sighing heavily, Abe took the Seward Treaty from his vest and asked to borrow his neighbor's pen.

Monday was a holiday. Right after breakfast, Walter changed into his golfing togs, hunted down his clubs, and told Jimmy they'd be spending the day on the links. He ended up playing the entire course, partly to improve his game, partly to postpone the inevitable.

His best shot of the day — a 350-yard blast with his one-iron — carried straight down the eighteenth fairway and ran right up on the green. Sink the putt, and he'd finish the day one under par.

Sweating in the relentless fifth-of-July sun, Jimmy pulled out the putter. Such a fine fellow, with his trim body and huge, eager eyes, zags of silver shooting through his steel-wool hair like the aftermath of an electrocution, his black biceps and white polo shirt meeting like adjacent squares on a chessboard. He would be sorely missed.

"No, Jimmy, we won't be needing that. Just pass the bag over here. Thanks."

As Walter retrieved his .22-caliber army rifle from among the clubs, Jimmy's face hardened with bewilderment.

"May I ask why you require a firearm?" said the slave.

"I'm going to shoot you."

"What?"

"Results came Thursday, Jimmy. You have Blue Nile. Sorry. I'd love to keep you around, but it's too dangerous, what with Marge's pregnancy and everything."

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Jimmy's teeth came together in a tight, dense grid. "In the name of reason, *sell* me. Surely that's a viable option."

"Let's be realistic. Nobody's going to take in a Nile-positive just to watch him wilt and die."

"Very well — then turn me loose." Sweat spouted from the slave's ebony face. "I'll pursue my remaining years on the road. I'll —"

"Loose? I can't go around undermining the economy like that, Jim. I'm sure you understand."

"There's something I've always wanted to tell you, Mr. Sherman."

"I'm listening."

"I believe you are probably the biggest asshole in the whole Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

"No need for that kind of talk, fellow. Just sit down on the green, and I'll —"

"No."

"Let's not make this difficult. Sit down, and you'll receive a swift shot in the head — no pain, a dignified death. Run away, and you'll get it in the back. It's your choice."

"Of course I'm going to run, you degenerate moron."

"Sit!"

Spinning around, Jimmy sprinted toward the rough. Walter jammed the stock against his shoulder and, like a biologist focusing his microscope on a protozoan, found the retreating chattel in his high-powered optical sight.

"Stop!"

Jimmy reached the western edge of the fairway just as Walter fired, a clean shot right through the slave's left calf. With a deep, wolfish howl, he pitched forward and, to Walter's surprise, rose almost instantly, clutching a rusty, discarded nine-iron that he evidently hoped to use as a crutch. But the slave got no farther. As he stood fully erect, his high, wrinkled forehead neatly entered the gunsight, the cross hairs branding him with an *X*, and Walter had but to squeeze the trigger again.

Impacting, the bullet dug out a substantial portion of cranium — a glutinous divot of skin, bone, and cerebrum shooting away from Jimmy's temple like a missile launched from a brown planet. He spun around twice and fell into the rough, landing behind a clump of rose bushes spangled with white blossoms. So: a dignified death after all.

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Tears bubbled out of Walter as if from a medicine dropper. Oh Jimmy, Jimmy. . . . And the worst was yet to come, wasn't it? Of course, he wouldn't tell Tanya the facts. "Jimmy was in pain," he'd say. "Unbearable agony. The doctors put him to sleep. He's in slave Heaven now." And they'd give him a classy send-off, oh yes, with flowers and a moment of silence. Maybe Pastor McClellan would be willing to preside.

Walter staggered toward the rough. To do a funeral, you needed a body. Doubtless the morticians could patch up his head, mold a gentle smile, bend his arms across his chest in a posture suggesting serenity. . . .

A tall, bearded man in an Abe Lincoln suit was on the eighteenth fairway, coming Walter's way. An eccentric, probably. Maybe a full-blown nut. Walter locked his gaze on the roses and marched straight ahead.

"I saw what you did," said the stranger, voice edged with indignation.

"Fellow had Blue Nile," Walter explained. The sun beat against his face like a hortator pounding a drum on a Roman galley. "It was an act of mercy. Hey, Abe, the Fourth of July was yesterday. Why the getup?"

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"Yesterday is never too late," said the stranger cryptically, pulling a yellowed sheaf from his vest. "Never too late," he repeated as, swathed in the hot, buttery light, he neatly ripped the document in half.

For Walter Sherman, pummeled by the heat, grieving for his lost slave, wearied by the imperatives of mercy, the world now became a swamp, an all-enveloping mire blurring the stranger's methodical progress toward McDonald's. An odd evening was coming, Walter sensed, with odder days to follow, days in which all the earth's stable things would be wrenched from their moorings and unbolted from their bases. Here and now, standing on the crisp border between the fairway and the putting green, Walter apprehended this discomforting future.

He felt it more emphatically as, eyes swirling, heart shivering, brain drifting in a sea of insane light, he staggered toward the roses.

And he knew it with a knife-sharp certainty as, searching through the rough, he found not Jimmy's corpse, but only the warm hulk of a humanoid machine, prostrate in the dusk, afloat in the slick, oily fluid leaking from its broken brow.

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# BOOKS

## ALGIS BUDRYS

*Fool on The Hill,* Matt Ruff, Atlantic Monthly, $19.95

*Endangered Species,* Gene Wolfe, Tor, $19.95

But, first, a relevant essay and then mentions of *A Rebel in Time, The Dragon Lord,* and *The Shockwave Rider,* all at $3.95, and *Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo* (and) *The Star Pit,* both in one volume at $2.95.

LAST SUMMER I taught an introductory class in SF writing at Harvard. The students ranged in academic status from college seniors to advanced-placement high school juniors. Some of them were unbelievably young. But as performance then proceeded to demonstrate, most of them were unusually intelligent and all of them were remarkably bright. There were fourteen of them.

Fully half had no idea of who John Campbell was . . . or perhaps the correct phrasing is "had been." Yet most of them were at least considering careers as SF writers, and obviously all of them had a substantial interest in the field.

This sort of thing gives one pause, if one is me. Here was at least an inch of the cutting edge, and it seemed it was prepared to go into battle without knowing what workings of history had labored to define the venue it would defend and extend.

Well, as a result of what I did during the said pause, I taught them who John Campbell was, and showed them why he had been important to me — as well as several other people. But they had taught me, finally, something I hadn't sufficiently articulated to myself in the course of many previous opportunities to do so. Which is that the edge does not need to know why or where it cuts; it *will* cut, for it feels the sure knowledge it was made to do that. And it's bootless to wonder whether it cuts wisely. In fact, one cannot actually decide that. One can decide whether one approves, and then if one is a bit dull, or a bit

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rascally, one can pretend to be discussing objective reality as distinguished from opinion. But the fact is, there are very few objective realities in the arts; there is the edge, and the cut, and the rest is opinion.

I find I'm verging here on a Tao of Sci-Fi, and should probably restrain myself. But the end-product of this way of ruminating is an affirmation of my long-standing intuition that while writings like this column are important to the field, there are things this column should never be tempted to do. By extension, they are things no art-criticism should attempt to do . . . in my opinion.

The largest part of these unwarranted things has to do with manifesto-thinking. Declarations that some form of an art is or is not worthier than another, and attacks on the substance of such declarations, seem equally outside the bounds. That doesn't mean they shouldn't be done; it only means they shouldn't be done in the guise of criticism as distinguished from the other branches of forensics. Criticism is criticism, I would think, when it describes how many legs and heads the beast has, and how these relate to the way it walks. Criticism transitions into something else during the course of saying something like "This is an ostrich and therefore not enough like an elephant," or "You don't know enough to have talent."*

Teaching is a form of criticism. I told my students about the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, and about *ASF* and about *ASF*'s writers, essentially because this piece of our history provides a good demonstration of how editing and writing relate to each other, and that is a dynamic process young writers should be aware of. But it would have been wrong to do it for any other reason. Campbell specifically, for Campbell's sake, is not something any artist needs to know in order to exercise talent. In fact, I am always wary of questioners who want to know what an artist's influences were, and artists who can list them in ready response. I tend to feel that an artist who knows his influences knows too much, and also not enough.

Ah, the Zen of Sci-Fi! Is all of this happening here in my mind today because I watched a docu-

* *The editor of the leading SF magazine of its day once said something very much like that to a writer of my close acquaintance. And after all these years, I now understand why I will never, ever forgive him. I can't; it's not a forgiveable thing; it's a demonstration of the deep-seated lack of qualification to be a first-rate editor, and one would have to find meaning in forgiving the ostrich for not being an elephant.*

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mentary on Akira Kurosawa late last night? No, I think not; I suspect, however, that my opinion of what I see is expressed in influenced terms. Yet my opinion is not the same as the thing I see. Similarly, what one thinks of one's work is not the same as one's work. There's much to be said for working only with strict reference to what one can see, in the confidence that one's perspective is consistent with reality. But there is also something to be said for occasionally sending to know what others see of the same reality, and so artists have teachers.

There's no escaping it.* At the very least, graphic artists at some early point in life probably have seen at least one picture, writers very probably have read something before they contemplate writing. So we are all to some extent preconditioned as to how we cut.

Thus, being a pure artist requires the presence of impurity. It's edge-and-cut restated, and strikingly analogous to what good steel is. In the end, much as I care about John Campbell the person, I did not care that my students care, and I didn't judge them for that. An artist should have a past — any past whatsoever — only in order to make a future. Any future whatsoever.

* *And so there's no escaping critics. I won't even apologize; there's no escaping being a critic, either.*

* * *

Well, all right, Budrys, what was all that leading up to?

For one thing, it needn't necessarily lead up to anything; it is, there it is, and a few hours ago it wasn't.

But for our purposes here, it leads up to the fact that I liked every one of the works listed below, but would be astonished if very many of you who have been patient enough to hang on these words will agree wholeheartedly.

Harry Harrison's *A Rebel in Time*, for instance, is not a masterpiece of prose, or, as a book founded on science and history, of historical research and scientific exposition. Harrison asserts the Great Depression occurred in 1920, and in another place he seems very much to be saying that the reason things drop is because they have first been lifted. Furthermore, in this 1983 novel now reissued by Tor, he does not characterize or write dialogue as well as he was to do in his *Eden* books, nor does it seem good pacing to have his hero enter the actual situation only at almost the exact mid-point of the text.

I don't care. Paranoid Colonel McCulloch has taken a fortune in gold, a Sten gun and blueprints for the Sten gun back in time so the South can win the Civil War and

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keep the Niggers in their place. Black Sergeant Harmon, indignant and frightened, has gone back in time to stop him. It's not a fresh theme, it's just sure-fire, and I enjoyed the result produced by this honest professional artist.

The bottom line on Harry Harrison is that he knows and loves science fiction, thinks science fictionally — and with uncommon ingenuity in that respect — and, while he tends to brawl his way through a work, works.

Similarly, David Drake's *The Dragon Lord* was enthusiastically reviewed here in its 1979 first edition because his handling of its theme was strikingly likeable. Looking at it analytically, it was striking for its application of science-fictional modes to the Arthurian mythos. What if Arthur had had the equivalent of the atomic bomb — e.g., one hell of a dragon — and all the resulting headaches? Thinking on it now, Drake — born two years after Campbell folded *Unknown* — did with Arthur something that would have played perfectly to the *Unknown* audience. And it doesn't matter if he went for that effect deliberately. Tor has now reissued its 1982 reprint edition, and I see that as a wise publishing move; more important, I see that as a clearcut favor to both the author and his readers.

Del Rey has reissued its 1976 reprint and re-edit of John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider*, which, in its 1975 first edition had been butchered by its trade publisher's copy-editing department.

Based on Brunner's artistic decision to push through the difficulties of actually depicting Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* situation, it's strikingly modern even now that Cyberpunk has been created and named. Brunner, again, is often wooden or at least artificial, for a major artist. But he *is* a major artist, which may tell you something more about what's important to artistry. Furthermore, if you're engaged in any way by Cyberpunk, you can't claim to have collected all the instances if you're not conversant with *The Shockwave Rider*. It's also quite possible you will simply, for its own sake, enjoy this, not only one of Brunner's best works but a superbly science-fictional one.

Tor has taken to doing doubles, such as Poul Anderson's *No Truce With Kings* and Fritz Leiber's *Ship of Shadows* or Greg Bear's *Hardfought* and *Cascade Point* by Timothy Zahn. These are done in one volume designed to look like either one of those novellas depending on which way you face the

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book. This is a genuine variation on the old Ace Doubles idea, in that the stories do not even pretend to be more than half a book length, and in that there is considerable artistic sapience in which stories are juxtaposed,* and in that in using reprints in this manner, Tor is able to sustain high all-around quality while giving book-market exposure to works otherwise difficult to showcase properly.

The example I particularly recommend to you right this minute is John Varley's *Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo* with Samuel R. Delany's *The Star Pit* or vice-versa. Even in a sapient and carefully forethought series, I think this one's the very best value of all, and I send you to it as best I can.

Just when you though I was going to talk only about re-issues this time, here I go telling you about Matt Ruff's *Fool on The Hill*, which hill is the one at Cornell University, Cornell turning out to be the abode of various sorts of sprite, and, as the story begins, a magnet for several highly puissant mythological characters, plus a dog in search of Heaven.

There are overtones here of Jack Finney's *The Circus of Doctor Lao* in particular and a number of other fantasy novels in that general mode. (For that matter, one should also point to the admixture of Richard Adams, the somewhat less definite but obviously present references to some of William Shakespeare, and of many a coming-of-age-at-college story, including *Animal House*.) But its publisher, no less a source than Atlantic Monthly Press, begins its flap copy veraciously with: It is a liverary event when a genuinely new fictional voice comes along.

And Ruff's is, indeed, a genuinely new voice, precedents and referents notwithstanding. How new? Thus: One laughs and cries in the presence of something that was not there until his work was done. There are of course, a fair number of things that have come into existence recently and were not there until recently. But this one has the quality of making you care that it now exists.

Ruff is young, *summa cum laude* Cornell '87. He looks out from his jacket photo with a (deserved) I-know-something-you-don't-know expression. In due course, he will learn it's best not to make too great a public play of that feeling. But he will always have it, I think, because the edge remembers the cut, and vice-versa. Similarly, I don't care

* *Donald Wollheim was working under quite different conditions while at Ace; no slight was intended here to one of this field's most sapient editors.*

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whether the publisher wants to associate him with those Sci-fi people or not, and neither will you.

*Enfin*, yet another Tor book — this one a hardcover, a Gene Wolfe collection called *Endangered Species*. There are upwards of thirty-five Wolfe stories here, some of which you will know from these pages, I suspect, and this does bid fair to be one of the most important collections of the decade, as editor David Hartwell proposes to those of us favored with advance copies.

Wolfe the artist has been compared to Mozart (by me, as it happens, in a Chicago *Sun-Times* review of one of the Urth books), and the reason I ventured that description to a general audience is because he is different from Shostakovich.

Wolfe places every note with such precision that clearly he doesn't do it with meticulous care. There isn't time in a person's life to do with meticulous care what Wolfe does so fluidly with such precision. Wolfe embraces the language and performs a dance with it; the dance is the cause, the steps are the effect. Now, that is art as anyone can plainly see it.

But the fact is, that is not art with the big A implied. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as art, the entity. There are artists, and the art each produces is the art of each. Wolfe is not better an artist than any other individual mentioned in this column. He may have attributes you like better than similar attributes of other artists. But what you have to like, or dislike, is not how Wolfe does, but what Wolfe does.

It's about time I pointed out that all of what I perceive to be elegance in Wolfe's work is not actually as important, I think, as Wolfe's characteristically telling a story that cries out to the heart of the SF reader, subtly and ingeniously, most important, powerfully. (There's an introduction in *Endangered Species*, and there Wolfe speaks a bit to this same point.)

Let me put it this way: There are dress swords and working swords. All dress swords are delicately engraved in pursuit of beauty. Some working swords are also decorated, but decoration is not what defines the cut.

God send us more edges!

ADDENDUM: I try never to go back. But some months ago I told you Stephen Vincent Benet's alternate-world story about Napoleon, "The Curfew Tolls," was John Collier's "Evening Primrose," which is about people inhabiting department stores. I am generally willing to remain stupid about one artist or another, but this instance seemed particularly egregious.

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# Books to Look For

## BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War: A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon*, Macmillan/Collier, trade paper, 479pp, $12.95

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard, Harper & Row, cloth, 274pp, $17.95

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, KOEI, computer game

EVERY NOW and then I point out to you a book that isn't sf or fantasy, just because I think it might appeal to the kind of people who like fiction that makes you think, that makes you reinterpret the world you live in.

Nayan Chanda's *Brother Enemy* is fascinating contemporary history by a first-rate journalist. Chanda, as a reporter for *Far Eastern Economic Review*, had the kind of access available only to journalists who come to oriental stories without looking — or acting — American. But this book transcends its story.

By the end of the book, you see clearly that we Americans weren't the only ones who acted out our fantasy version of the world in Southeast Asia. The Russians, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Cambodians — all of them took some of their most dangerous and outrageous steps because they believed that other people would act certain ways. The other people *never* cooperated. Every act was misinterpreted or overinterpreted by the other side, so that the pinheaded bureaucratic conflicts of Brzezinski and Vance are not the result of a unique American stupidity, but rather the way that all governments seem to make their decisions. The trouble is that every one of these decisions killed people.

Chanda shows us how unfathomably alien we human beings can be to each other. Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian expatriate writing history and literary criticism in Paris, makes this theme even clearer in *The Conquest of America*. Using the stories of Columbus and Cortes as a springboard, Todorov explores in marvelously clear philosophical terms the whole idea of how two alien cultures interact. As I read this book, I found Todorov again and again making explicit ideas about alienness only touched on in the best and most

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insightful science fiction.

While Cortes was busy trying to understand the Mexicans in order to exploit their weaknesses and conquer them (itself a revolutionary concept among the Spanish), Montezuma and the Mexicans were busy trying to understand, not the Spaniards, but rather what the gods meant by sending them. In practical terms, this guaranteed the Spanish conquest; but in spiritual and philosophical terms, neither culture proved to be "superior" to the other.

If the philosophical issues raised by science fiction about aliens are as interesting to you as the stories themselves, these two books will delight you as they did me. They're also fascinating history, not least because they weren't written by Americans, with American assumptions. I read them in alternation over the past couple of weeks, and I feel like my world has grown larger because of it.

By coincidence, through the same weeks I was playing the computer game *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* Already a hit in Japan, where it was created, this game is a vivid simulation of the world and events of China after the fall of the Second Han dynasty, beginning in 189 A.D. No, there's no sf or fantasy element — but because this brilliantly designed and programmed game was created by Japanese gamewrights and takes place in ancient China, it *is* an experience of immersion in an alien world. Yet it is a world that is recognizably like the one Chanda describes in *Brother Enemy*, with cultural assumptions very different from our own; and learning to master the play of the game requires, on a very small scale, some of the cultural reinterpretation that Todorov so brilliantly describes in *The Conquest of America.*

Robert Cormier, *Fade*, Delacorte, cloth, 310pp, $15.95

Cormier is one of those writers caught up in the contradictions of the genrification of American publishing. Because his protagonists are children, his books are all published as young adult novels. But because he is a brilliant writer with a dark and terrible vision, his books are so disturbing that I'd think twice before turning them over to the average child. In case you've been living on the moon, this is the author of *I Am the Cheese*, a book so complex that I've used it to teach all the principles of literary structure, and *The Chocolate War*, a disturbing look at how fascism can arise in an activity so seemingly benign as selling chocolates to raise money for the local high school.

*Fade* is something new for

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Cormier, however. First, he is mining his own experiences growing up as a French Canadian — a "Canuck" — in Massachusetts. I believe storytellers often do their best work when they write about their own community, the group that gave them their root identity.

Second, *Fade* is Cormier's first venture into fantasy. Paul, the hero, has long been intrigued by a family picture in which his uncle Adelard does *not* appear — even though everyone swears that he was there when the picture was snapped. Then he discovers that he, too, has Adelard's ability to fade, to become invisible at will.

Fading, though, is a two-edged sword. Paul can humiliate the local bully; but he also discovers secrets about friends and neighbors that make it impossible for him to like them anymore. And as the fading starts to become involuntary, it finally distorts his whole life, cutting off many of his fondest dreams.

Because this is a Cormier novel, it refuses to stay simple. Halfway through, the narrative suddenly stops, and we realize that we have been reading an unpublished manuscript by a famous — but dead — author named Paul Renault. But as his cousin and his agent discover, there is more truth to the story than they'd like to admit. And the second half of the manuscript brings us face to face with the most terrible possibilities of fading.

It is unfortunate that this exquisite novel is somewhat marred by a stock horror ending — the sort of silliness we saw in Stephen King's *Christine*, for instance, in which we start hearing news reports about portentous events that suggest that the whole thing is beginning all over again. Please, folks, let's give that one a rest, can't we? But in this case, the flaw is easily forgotten. What haunts us is the character of Paul, whose discovery of his own sexuality and adulthood coincides with his piercing of other people's facades of respectability.

And, as with all good fantasy, *Fade* is clearly true. Young adolescents are in fact as invisible and rarely-considered as children; yet they are old enough to understand the events swirling around them. This gives them a terrible power, and if they are not wise or good, they can destroy people with it. I'm not sure this novel is for teenagers at all. It might just be for adults, to help us understand these invisible people growing up in our houses.

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*"Have you ever wondered why there are so many truly awful films!" After reading this tale by master storyteller John Brunner, one in a series about Mr. Secrett, you will know — but you may also wonder if this is truth or fiction.*

# THE MAN WITH A TASTE FOR TURKEYS

**By John Brunner**

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why there are so many truly *awful* films? Have you ever wondered not just what becomes of them, but how the people who made them have often managed to finance a second, even a third, equally appalling? Who would book them? Who would pay to see them? Why weren't their producers, their directors, their scriptwriters — I say nothing of the unfortunates who "acted" in them, since, like yours truly when obliged to ghost books for Laszlo Perkins and his kind, they were presumably driven to it by economic necessity — but why were the people ultimately responsible not hounded out of the movie business, refused credit by their banks, mocked until they fled in shame?

Some such questions are easier to answer than others. For instance, one is aware that the absolute worst of the turkeys enjoy a fragile but continuing lease on life thanks to TV series that hold them up to ridicule,

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or science fiction conventions where they are included in the program as comedy makeweight.

Yet and still they continue to proliferate. Any listing of the year's new pictures inevitably includes sundry items to set alongside *Robot Monster* or *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* or *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* or *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. Quite recently, for instance, you may have run across *I Was a Teenage Mutant*, or even —

No, come to think of it, you probably don't know about *Gay SS Squadron on Venus, Cactus Men of Cassiopeia*, and *Wet Her T-shirt with Blood*. Let alone *Spetsnaz Bikers Invade the U.S.A.* . . .

I do. I have sat through them, and a good many others of which — blessedly — I can no longer recall the titles. By the end of that hideous experience, I already knew the answer to one important question: Where do the makers of these awful pictures get to show them?

Said answer is pretty simple. At film festivals in places nobody has ever heard of. I so testify.

And what is more. . . .

Sighing, I find myself compelled to admit that I haven't lived through such a totally wasted week as I originally believed. Now I can answer all the other questions I began by listing. Don't, though, imagine I worked the solution out unaided. Oh no. It had to be explained to me.

By — who else? Excuse me: whom else?

Right in one. Mr. Secrett. Blast him!

It was my own silly fault. I ought to have realized after such a long acquaintance that Laszlo Perkins never does anyone a favor. Not out of disinterest and the kindness of his heart, at any rate.

Yet and still, being the forgiving, or perhaps more exactly the forgetting, type, I couldn't help feeling flattered when I received a registered envelope from the organizers of a film festival in northern Italy, due to open next week at —

Well, I have nothing against the inhabitants of the town in question, a pretty little place nestling among hills and forests. What chance I had to mix with them suggested they are perfectly nice, and one of them certainly was. I'm willing to accept that they, like me, were conned.

So I'll settle for referring to their home as Averno, the *descensus* to which is traditionally *facilis*, like mine.

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You see, the envelope proved to contain a glossy folder in four languages announcing the first Averno Festival of Underrated Movies, plus a letters signed by the president of the committee and the mayor. This informed me, in barely decodable English, that one of the persons they had invited to serve on their jury, to award Bronze, Silver, and Gold Craters in each of the following categories (I skipped that bit, though I did wonder how exactly one could be awarded a crater; later I discovered it's a kind of classical wine cup, and they'd had some replicas molded in plastic), had been obliged for personal reasons to withdraw, but had proposed me as his stand-in. The organizers apologized for the short notice, but if by any chance I were in a position to accept, I should send a telex at once; an air ticket would be provided; a car would meet me at the airport; my accommodation and meals during the week of the festival would be assured. . . .

Candidly, I'm ashamed to admit how quickly I replied. I hadn't expected any break from my daily grind for the foreseeable future, and possibly beyond. A free trip to the Italian mountains sounded like a gift from the gods.

Even though the person who had declined was Laszlo Perkins, and my agent could have told me, at the cost of a local phone call, that his reasons were not personal at all. In fact, he was closeted with (once more I have to add "of course") the celebrated producer Mr. Casporale, this time to work out of the shooting schedule for a TV series based on his latest best-seller, *Pointing the Bone: Your Key to the Dream Time and Its Mystic Power.*

I didn't do any of the ghostwriting on that one. Perkins used a bloke in Sydney. Currently Mr. Agent was annoyed because, despite having been advised about the project, I had not volunteered to fly to Oz at my own expense so that he could take his regular cut from my research fee. That was basically why I didn't ring him.

In case you were wondering.

At the start, my trip went smoothly enough. I confess that — since my mental picture of film festivals was mainly derived from news reports of Cannes — I had hoped for my first chance to travel first-class, but I wasn't too disappointed to find I was in economy. It's quite a short ride, after all. The driver sent to meet me did turn up a bit late, but only by fifteen minutes; and besides, she was slim, fair, and pretty, with a good command

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of English. Along with the vision of a luxury flight, admittedly, I also had to abandon my image of a waiting limousine; her car was an old Innocenti Mini. I consoled myself with the reflection that a stretched limo could never safely have negotiated such narrow, winding roads. Carla — that was her name — was used to them and drove with. . . .

Hmm! What's Italian for "dash"? I'm sure I've run across it. . . . Oh, of course. *Brìo.* I clung to the door handle all the way. Still, we arrived in one piece.

And I didn't even raise objections when the last of my preconceptions was dispelled. As a jury member at a film festival, I expected to be lodged in a five-star hotel — four at the least. Even as we entered the little town, though, I grew aware that this was bound to be different from Cannes.

Still the room I was allotted in an *albèrgo* five minutes' downhill stroll from the main square, but ten minutes' huffing and puffing back again, was clean and comfortable, and it did have a splendid view.

Having unpacked, having studied the tourist map that Carla had given me along with a timetable indicating where I was supposed to be and when, I set out optimistically for the first item on my agenda, a cocktail party and buffet dinner at the town hall, where I was to meet my fellow jurors, the festival organizers, and members of the town council.

I was a little daunted, even at that stage, by the discovery that I had committed myself to watching five films a day for the next five days. I consoled myself with the thought that when I returned to London, I might be able to boast about having seen some neglected masterwork — even recommend it to a British distributor and claim a finder's fee.

How wrong I was . . . !

BY THE end of the week, I was looking back on myself as I had been at the start, and shaking my head over my naiveté. I won't weary you with all the reasons. Suffice it to say that it took me longer than it should have to figure out just how monstrous an insult to art, morality, and good sense I was committed to aiding and abetting.

At first blush the setup didn't seem too bad. Oh, there was a gang of outsize egos on parade, but the entertainment biz is rife with that kind of thing, and I — even I, in my petty fashion — have yielded to the temptation of being a big frog in a little pond. So I didn't pay much attention to

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the people who came courting the jury members: actors like third carbon copies of Clint Eastwood (one was called Bent Hardwood, or said he was); actresses aware that their major assets resided between neck and navel and had decided to expose them to the full; directors with immense lists of credits always ready to hand, duplicated rather than photocopied, and extremely badly typed; producers choking on large cigars they clearly felt to be part of their image — these last, of course, not including the Americans, who were heavily, and I do mean overweight-type heavily, into jogging twenty times around the town square before breakfast and boasting about the fact for the rest of the day.

I was grateful for Carla, who had taken a shine to me. Several times she steered me clear of what threatened to become a lecture on the career of one or other of these "distinguished personalities," on the grounds that I hadn't yet met Mr. So-and-so (who invariably turned out to be one) or Ms. Such-and-such (who seemed set on conveying that she could be a so-and-so with the right partner). In the upshot, it was Carla, at the end of the evening when she set my feet on the right road for my hotel, who gave me my first inkling of what I'd got mixed up in.

She, being as idealistic as I would like to be myself, said she didn't feel it proper for festival exhibitors to nobble the jury, so please would I decline invitations or gifts from anyone in competition?

I promised I would, within the limits of politeness.

I was the only one. . . .

Who else was on the jury? Don't worry. You won't have heard of them. Not unless you're into exotic areas of the cinematic art, like casting and location scouting for spaghetti Westerns, or raising funds to hire the Yugoslavian Army for international coproductions destined for the Arab world and Pakistan. The least peculiar of my co-jurors was a retired make-up man from Cinecittá, who at what struck me as rather an advanced age was still attempting to apply his expertise to his own raddled features.

(In retrospect, I have the feeling that I was already bracing myself for an encounter with Mr. Secrett. I don't see how that's possible; I don't believe he can broadcast echoes of his presence ahead in time. But it had been he who first scolded me for using "raddled" as though it equated to "time-worn," when in fact it means "smeared with rouge," and sent me to confirm it in a dictionary. What is more, I can't disguise from myself the clear recollection that more than once during my miserable week in

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Averno, I'd wished I had someone like him to turn to. . . .)

The festival program worked this way. There was one actual cinema called the Rialto, poky and run-down but much like the kind I remember from my childhood, with a regular clientele greeted by the manager and ticket girl as they came in. Initially I developed a sentimental attachment to it, supplanted by nausea at about the time the regulars decided they would rather watch TV, even though many had bought — or, I suspect, been given — season tickets for the festival. The manager did his best to look cheerful, but he was an even worse actor than most of the performers currently occupying his screen.

Then there was the council chamber in the town hall, which had been cleared of its usual grand table and filled with rows of plastic chairs, with a temporary projection booth at the back. The glazing bars of its windows were too corroded for them to be safely opened and shut; they were also very hard to black out. The season being high summer, few people attended more than one daytime session, trapped as they were between intrusive sunshine and stifling heat, though the room did fill up in the evening.

The main reason for that, I concluded on the second day, was the choice of the third location for the screenings.

This was in the open air, at the sole relic of the past that Averno might honestly describe as a tourist attraction: a ruined castle built by the Franks on a "nearby" hilltop.

*Nearby!* Whoever put that lie into the festival brochure should be made to trudge back from it the way I did on the final night, when, owing to Carla's insistence, I attended the last showing of the only festival entry I hadn't yet caught up with. It was the one about Russian saboteurs coming ashore from a submarine off the coast of California, equipped with superbikes and enough miniaturized nuclear weapons to destroy the continent. Which, predictably, are stolen from them in the nick of time thanks to an American biker groupie who distracts their officers by letting them gang-bang her (close-up, in color) for as long as it takes her friends, a bunch of misunderstood but fundamentally patriotic motorcycle freaks, to purloin the bombs and sail away into the sunset, swearing to wipe out Vladivostok.

By the time I got back to festival headquarters, a grand party was in

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progress. Since the award ceremony was due the following morning — a press conference had been called for 10:00 A.M. — I tried to consult with a few of the other jurors, and was brushed aside.

Gradually, it began to dawn on me that I might well be the only one among us who had actually seen all the entries. I remember feeling very cold, though it was still a fine warm summer night.

Up to that point, I'd been taking my task seriously. I hadn't been impressed by any of the films on show, and not a few had disgusted me, but I long ago learned that my judgment is too precious (Mr. Secrett used that term to me) for the rough-and-tumble of the commercial world. I was prepared to listen to other people's arguments concerning their pop-cultural value. Occasionally — make that often — I grow desperate at my own lack of status and success, as though everybody in the world but I were speaking a common language.

Carla turned up from nowhere and handed me a drink. I emptied it and asked for another. When I took it from her, I voiced my suspicions, and she nodded, looking worried.

"I think it is not honest," she whispered. "I think it is all a fix."

Gulping down the second drink — she had brought me some kind of local liqueur that the manufacturers were trying to promote for export, and it was fierce — I said, "Right, we'll see about that!" And headed straight for the chairman, who during our brief and unfruitful jury meetings had said as little as possible except to remind us of the time. He was deep in conversation with the producer of *Gay SS Squadron on Venus* and its leading boy. Who, incidentally, kept glancing sourly at Carla: not for any of the usual reasons, but as though he felt the slinky cocktail dress she had put on tonight instead of her usual T-shirt and jeans would have looked better on him.

Interrupting the chairperson, I challenged him. I demanded whether he had in fact seen all the films in competition. Brushing back his receding — but impeccably coiffed — hair, he reassured me in his most soothing tone, as though dealing with a recalcitrant child.

"Yes, of course. If not at the public exhibitions, then on videotapes brought by the producers."

"Every one?"

"Is that not the duty of the jury?"

Whereupon he turned and resumed his conversation with the producer.

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Finally — finally! — I was catching on. Of course there was no need for a meeting of the jury tonight to decide the awards. The destination of all those "craters" had already been settled, behind the scenes where I was not admitted.

Yet, for another long moment, I wanted not to believe it.

Sensing my distress, Carla put a conforting arm around me and led me to a chair where I could sit down with my head in my hands. Kneeling at my side, she whispered, "I know how you must feel. All my life I have wanted to work in the cinema, to be one day a great director. I was never at a film festival before. When I learned that one was to be held in my own little hometown, I was overjoyed! I volunteered to work for it at once, without pay! But now I fear I shall never achieve my ambition. If it is people like this who run the business, and they can get the money for...."

Her voice trailed away. I raised my head. I began to think about what the ghastly — ludicrous — contemptible waste of film I'd been watching for the past few days must have cost; what the festival as a whole must have cost; what tonight's party must be costing in present time, for here came yet another waiter with bottles of sparkling wine in either hand....

I said to Carla, "Are there any journalists here?"

She shook her head.

"But tomorrow there will be."

"Then I want to talk to them. At length, in detail. Before the awards are given out. Arrange it, please. I'm going to bed."

Even at that stage, I had hopes. But it was long before I fell asleep.

In the morning, Carla turned up punctually for the first time. During the week, she had shrugged off her lateness in the true Mediterranean style, on the grounds that none of the showings would start on schedule. In that, I must admit, she was quite correct. Indeed, the showing I attended of *Cactus Men of Cassiopeia* was so overdue that I missed a dinner invitation from its producer, at what I was later told was the best restaurant within fifty kilometers. However, I got my own back. Another equally dreadful film of his was shown the following evening. Anonymous in the darkness of the Rialto Cinema, I laughed as loudly and often as I could. So successful was I that when the audience staggered back to the street, many were crying with mirth and had to cling to one another for support. I wasn't much amused myself, but I felt gratified....

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## How could so much money and power have come together for the purpose of promoting evil garbage?

This time, however, Carla was prompt, even early. And brought bad news — so bad that her normally excellent English was betraying her.

"You cannot talk to reporters! All are at the festival headquarters right now, except one I was to bring."

For a moment I was confused. At length I said foolishly, "You mean, you ought to have gone to the airport —"

"No, meet a train!" She was clenching her fists, and it was clear from her face and voice she was struggling not to cry. "But I don't want no more part of this! Last night I heard. . . ."

"What?" Suddenly alarmed, I seized her hand. "Tell me!"

"They guess what you want to do. They send a bad — rude, is right? Yes? Rude message to *signore* Perkins because he not explained everything to you, tell you do like he would. You talk to reports — repor*ters* —no plane home, nothing. Stuck here, all cancelated!"

*Omigawd. . . .*

But how, here in the peaceful heart of northern Italy, could so much money and power have come together for the purpose of promoting what I could only term rubbish — garbage; in some cases, *evil* garbage — all for the sake of a few trophies made of metalized plastic?

Well, if I can boast of no other talent for survival, I can at least recognize when I'm beaten. I said, "Can I switch to an earlier flight before my ticket's canceled?"

"I changed the reservation!" she said. "You pack! I bring you in time!"

So that was how I missed the award ceremony and press conference at the only film festival where I ever served as a member of the jury, or am ever likely to.

But my tribulations weren't yet over.

The plane Carla had switched me to was a British Airways Tristar, otherwise known as the Lockheed L-1011. It's a fair enough aircraft in most respects, but it has one major drawback, at least in its BA configuration. It doesn't have nearly enough overhead stowage in the cabin. Having packed in such a rush, I hadn't been able to fill my checked bag as in-

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geniously as usual, and I arrived on board with a bulging plastic carrier as well as the case I normally stow under the seat in front.

Late, sweating, anxious, I was trying to stuff it into a locker already crammed to near capacity, when a long arm reached over my shoulder, and a familiar voice said, "Let me give it a shove, old man! I have an inch or two on you. . . . There!"

And, as the locker clicked safely shut, I turned to find myself confronting Mr. Secrett, in his usual holiday garb of khaki jacket, Aertex shirt, and Austin Reed choker, waiting to slide past me into the window seat. I was too astonished to do anything but move out of his way.

Fastening his seat belt, he went on, "Well, well, Scrivener! You're about the last person I expected to bump into, although of course I knew you were in Italy. But according to the press reports I've been reading in Florence — that's where I've been, by the way, fulfilling an old ambition to visit every last one of its museums and art galleries — they ought to be announcing the awards at the Averno Film Festival round about now. You being on the jury, I'd have presumed —"

Interrupting without apology, I told him in graphic and sometimes unprintable terms what I thought of the Averno festival, its organizers, its jury, and the films I'd been compelled to suffer through. It took a long time. The plane was leveling off at cruising altitude before he got another word in, and that was only because, not having had so much as a cup of coffee this morning, I'd made my throat too dry to continue.

But at least I managed to wind up with the most burning of my questions, in an appropriately raucous tone:

"How in heaven's name do they manage to get these films *made*?"

Coughing gently, Mr. Secrett drew my attention to the fact that a stewardess was asking what we wanted to drink. I ordered mineral water and black coffee, and Mr. Secrett took a lemon tea. Having sipped it, found it too hot, and set it down to cool, he gave a sigh.

"Oh dear, Scrivener! How much trouble you could have saved yourself by making a single phone call!"

"I already explained why I'm not on speaking terms with my agent at the moment —"

"No, no, no! Not to him. To me. I don't suppose I could have stopped you from going; indeed, why should I? A free trip to Italy is not, as they say, to be sneezed at. However, I could at least have warned you what to expect."

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I blinked. "But why in the world should I have thought of ringing. . . .?"

The words died on my tongue. He was right. I ought always to think of consulting Mr. Secrett before committing myself to any course of action.

I muttered at length, "I suppose you know precisely how they contrive to raise the finance for these abominable pictures."

"As a matter of fact. . . ."

"Go on," I said resignedly. "I'm all ears."

You may (said Mr. Secrett) recall my mentioning that during my *Wanderjahre* I spent a few weeks in and around Hollywood.*

Not unnaturally, one of the things I wanted to do was visit a major studio and see a picture actually being shot. "On the floor" is, I believe, the technical term.

To my vast disappointment, the boastful claims made by the few people I was acquainted with in the area concering their intimacy with the great names of the Silver Screen were not borne out. All my requests for the necessary contacts were met with evasion and prevarication, until my time was almost up and I had begun to despair of fulfilling this relatively minor ambition.

Then, by chance, I fell in with someone who was actually working on a film, albeit in a lowly capacity. Let's call him — *hrmph!* — Joe Painter. His job was to repair damage caused to the sets during a failed "take," prior to reshooting. The director, he told me, was keeping him pretty busy, for he vacillated between frantic haste and time-wasting perfectionism.

"Lord knows why," Joe said gloomily into his glass of beer. "Nobody's in any hurry to see this turkey, and no matter how much attention he pays to detail, it won't help."

My sole concern, however, was to gain entrée to a working soundstage, no matter how minor the production. I wheedled and cajoled, and in the end, Joe agreed to arrange a studio pass for me on the pretext of my being a journalist. I worried about having no proof of identity, but he waved that objection aside.

"Don't worry!" he said. "Wear your hat on the back of your head; keep a cigarette dangling from your lower lip — No, just a second; you don't smoke, do you? Well, chew gum all the time, then: stuff your breast pocket full of pens and pencils; carry a good big notebook and keep flipping its

*See The Man Who Made the Fur Fly *(F&SF June 1985)*

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pages. In other words, make like a Hollywood caricature of a reporter. The idiots in this town don't know any other kind. You'll get away with it."

Feeling rather foolish, I agreed to comply. But he was quite right.

I was obliged to turn up disgustingly early the next morning, but it was already promising to be an extremely hot day, and I confess I was perspiring freely when I made my way onto the soundstage. The overarching roof looked to me the size of a railway terminus, and probably was, but after I gaped at it for a while, my awe began to fade. (I was, bear in mind, still at a most impressionable age.) I began to notice how shoddy the sets were on which the — just a moment; it will come back to me — the kliegs were being targeted, and, by their almost painful glare, I saw how much dirt lay among the snaking electric cables, how littered the floor was with trodden-out cigarettes, how altogether repulsive was this factory for mass-producing celluloid dreams. What is more, the place stank.

Determined, nonetheless, to gain what I could from this unique opportunity, I played my role to the hilt. After Joe and I had exchanged a few words, he introduced me to his superior, the chief set designer, whom I questioned at some length. He in turn passed me on to the lighting and recording engineers, in such wise that by the time shooting actually started for the day, everyone was convinced I was there by right. I was even presented to the director.

The director. . . .

It is quite possible that you will decline to believe this, but I assure you it is a sober fact. His name was Rudolf Schlock. Please don't laugh. The circumstances attached to his presence in Hollywood were far from comic. He had worked throughout the war in Germany, making propaganda films. Despite having been officially "de-Nazified," as the term went, he had changed his opinions not one iota, to such an extent that, when informed what his surname in its Yiddish version signified in his country of adoption, he declined to change it, on the grounds that to do so would be to bow down to the dictates of "bestial Jews." . . . And he had found plenty of people in the movie world to admire his stand.

This I had learned from Joe Painter the night before. At the time, I'd been disinclined to believe it. By midmorning I was convinced the charge must be well founded. How else could he be directing at all, save through the good offices of people who shared his pernicious ideology? The sets

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were of less than village-hall amateur-dramatic quality; the players, none of whom I'd ever heard of, were atrocious; the dialogue was abysmal; so indeed was the entire script, which I leafed through surreptitiously when the continuity girl was called away to settle an argument between *Herr* Schlock and the person I can only out of courtesy refer to as his leading *lady*. . . .

In sum, Scrivener, I had been reduced in a few short hours to the state of shock in which you beat your retreat from Averno.

With two, possibly three, minutes of film "in the can," the lunch break loomed. I had decided to stick around in hopes of being offered a complimentary meal, after which I intended to make myself scarce, when the most amazing thing happened. Right in the middle of the second take, one of the doors to the soundstage opened and a distinguished-looking elderly gentleman limped in, leaning on a stick and accompanied by a solicitous nurse. I expected *Herr* Schlock to excel himself with another outburst of the bad temper that he had already displayed a couple of times that morning. I was wrong. And the moment I allowed myself to believe my eyes, I realized why.

For the intruder was none other than Sir Victor Warren.

Nowadays, of course, he is scarcely remembered, but in his time he was at least as famous as C. Aubrey Smith. The title was genuine, incidentally; he was a baronet. He had been one of the first members of that colony of British expatriates who exerted such a civilizing influence on Tinsel Town during the interwar years. He kept wicket for one of their cricket teams; he had his breakfast kippers sent by air from Aberdeen; for a party to mark his fiftieth birthday, he brought over the chef from his London club and gave him carte blanche concerning the dinner menu. . . . In sum, he was one of the Grand Old Gentlemen of the film community. What he was doing here, I could not conceive.

Yet he chatted affably with Schlock, bestowed compliments and good wishes all round, and even sat patiently out of shot during the next take. Meantime I changed my mind about begging for a buckshee meal in the studio canteen. Here was one of the people I really wanted to meet. Now was my only chance!

I spat my gum to the floor; it made no appreciable difference to the existing mess. I threw away most of my pens save my Osmiroid, which I hid in my inside pocket. I neatened my appearance as best I could,

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removed my hat, and, as soon as the take was over, I ventured to approach. He was rising to depart — with some difficulty and the help of his nurse — and for a moment I feared I'd delayed too long.

Then inspiration dawned as I thought of a good reason for me to command his attention.

I coughed loudly. *Herr* Schlock noticed me, remembered who I was pretending to be, and beckoned me over at once.

"Thanks to you, and the support of others like you," he said fawningly to Sir Victor, "my movie is attracting the attention of the press. Here's a journalist who has spent the morning interviewing me and the cast. Mr. — ah. . . ."

I dropped my disguise, adopted my most formal English accent, and shook Sir Victor's hand.

"Secrett, sir," I said. "Until recently, Captain Secrett, Royal Pioneer Corps. I've had the honor of serving with a number of officers from what I believe was your regiment during the first big show."

He stared at me suspiciously under bristling gray eyebrows. "That being . . . ?"

"The Pinks and Posies, sir." I meant, as you are no doubt aware, the regiment that resulted from amalgamating the old Worcestershire Light Horse with the Third Kentish Cavalry — both counties, of course, having laid claim to the title "The Garden of England," hence the nickname. It was not quite comme il faut for an outsider to use it, but offhand, I could think of no better credential.

Anyway, as the jargon has it, the ploy worked a treat. He brightened immediately, said it was always a pleasure to meet young people from the Old Country, inquired whether I needed to spend any more time here, and, on learning that my business was finished, invited me to join him for lunch.

HE PROVED to be a most agreeable and entertaining host, with a keen sense of humor. When, after our second *chota peg* — scotch and not too much soda — at what was then the only decent Indian restaurant in the whole of California, I ventured to explain the false colors under which I had been sailing at the studio, he laughed so much I was afraid he might choke. But the conversation remained general until we had finished our meal, whereupon he proposed that

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we adjourn to a pleasantly shady veranda open only to the establishment's most distinguished clientele, where we could indulge in a cigar without offending those who were still eating. He was, as I said, a great gentleman. I even essayed a cigar on his recommendation, though I must say that it failed, like all the others I had tried, to imbue me with a taste for tobacco.

The conversation flagged at length; indeed, convinced he was about to take a postprandial nap, I was preparing to make a discreet departure, when he suddenly leaned toward me in a confidential manner and said, "Young feller-me-lad, I can guess what's been going on inside that head of yours, only you're too polite to speak out. Even though you're not really a reporter, you're itching to know what in the world brought me to Schlock's studio today."

I hesitated only a moment before I said, "Yes!"

He chuckled. "Very well, I'll tell you. But on two conditions!"

"Any condition," I said firmly.

"Your word as an officer and a gentleman?"

This was unexpectedly formal. I drew myself up and tried to look as though I were offended.

"All right, all right," he grunted, sinking back in his chair. "I shouldn't have said that.... Nonetheless, I must impose conditions. The first is that you never repeat to anyone what I'm about to tell you until I'm safely in my grave. Still, that's unlikely to be long."

Startled, I was about to remonstrate, but he brushed my words aside.

"*I* know, even if my fool of a doctor doesn't. Two years, three if I'm lucky. The old ticker, y'know. I've lived with it longer than he has. I can tell when it's missing a beat.

"And the second condition is this. Even after I'm gone, you may share the information only with a person who, in your view, genuinely deserves to know about it. Never mind what I mean. You'll work it out in due time, or you're not the feller I take you for. Well, shall I continue?"

My answer was a fervent, "Yes!"

I came briefly back to the reality of a Tristar droning across northern France. At some stage during Mr. Secrett's exposition, a meal had been set on the tray-tables in front of us. I hadn't touched mine. I'd been too engrossed.

Mr. Secrett, on the other hand, had demolished his down to the last

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smear of imitation cream on his dessert. How he managed that without at any stage making me aware of a hiatus in his tale, I've no idea. Days later, I still have no idea. I can only remember saying sourly, "And what was the mystery he unveiled for you? Or am I not a person who deserves to be told?"

He glanced at me reproachfully under his gray brows; I wondered whether he had cultivated them after the example set by Sir Victor Warren.

"Scrivener, how can you say that? It's precisely because you are deserving that for the first time I dare to breach the duty of confidence Sir Victor laid on me."

"The first time?"

"Yes. Quite literally."

Humbled and ashamed, I said, "Please go on."

"I can't say you seemed very interested —"

"I am, I am! It's — well, it's just that I can't imagine what connection something that happened all those years ago can have with the shambles at Averno!"

"Not for the first time, Scrivener, you disappoint me. You, after all, are supposed to possess the vivid imagination of a professional writer. . . . However, the connection is a very direct one, I assure you." He mopped his upper lip with a paper napkin. Crumpling it, tilting back his seat, he stared anew into the past.

To people like Sir Victor Warren (Mr. Secrett continued), living in Hollywood was rather like the plight of Greeks at the court of Imperial Rome. They were surrounded by all the luxury that wealth could command; they themselves, however, survived at the whim of people whom they regarded as half-civilized barbarians. Picture the dismay of actors, writers, designers, composers, even poets, accustomed to thinking of themselves as creative individuals, on finding that their employers — most of whom had made their fortunes in commercial undertakings such as the "rag trade" — expected them to become inspired to order. As though the Muse Herself were up for sale!

At this point I suppose I should inject a footnote. At the time when these confidences were originally shared with me, I would never have dared even to adumbrate this aspect of the matter. Insofar as there has

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been progress in the past generation, I suppose one may say it has led to greater liberty in this area, at least. . . . You will instantly catch my drift when I say that many of the British expatriates who so resented the predicament in which they found themselves, shared certain personal proclivities with those same Greeks I invoked just now, and thus were free of any obligation to provide for offspring. I trust I do not have to speak more bluntly?

Precisely when the scheme was mooted first, I've no idea. I can say only that it must have been during the middle thirties, when despite — or perhaps because of — the slump, the movie "biz" was riding the crest of a wave, at least in the sense that there were still many people in Hollywood who had more money than they knew what to do with.

Including several of us. I mean we British, or, as we would then have said, we English.

One of whom, not a — ha-ha! — settler, but a visitor from Home, after listening to a particularly biting series of insults directed against the studio bosses, hit on a perfectly brilliant idea. It is so brilliant, one is tempted to assume that one may safely guess his identity—

Ah, but dear Noël is long dead. *De mortuis*. . . .

To the quick of the ulcer. What he said, in effect, was this.

"They're making pictures that we think are ghastly but everyone else thinks are wonderful. Why don't you ensure they make some that everyone will know to be ghastly, because nobody in his senses could claim otherwise?"

As a result of which, on that warm, pleasant, no doubt slightly alcoholic afternoon, a group of "Brits" devised a subtle, albeit cruel, means of revenging themselves for the humiliation they had been subjected to. It cost each of them, initially, five thousand dollars, but they felt it a small price to pay.

For what they decided to do was make certain that next year a film would emanate from Tinsel Town of such indescribable badness that no one would ever again be tempted to treat the American movie industry seriously. All of them knew of potential candidates; they drew lots to see who should be the first beneficiary.

Before you ask, Sir Victor didn't tell me the winner's name or the title of his film. He said only that the Brits attended its premiere and — like the audience at Averno that you told me of — staggered home in stitches.

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Their first venture having proved a success, they put more money in the pot and funded another, similar "turkey" the next year. With war clouds looming, however, and also because some of them were getting on a bit, they decided they must develop their original scheme into rather more permanent form.

Sir Victor spared me the blow-by-blow account, but what it boiled down to was that they established an investment trust, administered by intermediaries so as to preserve their anonymity. The theoretical purpose of the income that it earned was to make grants to deserving producers.

In practice, it was used to finance the Turkey Awards.

These, in case you're wondering, did not in any way resemble the Craters at Averno. They consisted of nothing so trivial as a trophy. On the contrary! The winners received, and to this day still do receive, a considerable sum of money, upon two conditions: first, that they produce another film; second, that at least a third of the grant be expended on promotion of their previous masterwork.

I sense the dawn of comprehension. Yes, of course! The adjudicators of the Turkey Awards choose the beneficiaries with care. So far, out of a hundred-plus, only a handful — 2 or 3 percent — have "taken the money and run." The rest have duly spent their windfall on ensuring that their terrible, awful, repulsive films *actually get shown*. This is how they get included in the official exhibition list at festivals like Averno! This is why they turn up as second features in Venezuela and Outer Mongolia!

They are the fine and ultimate fruit of a practical joke perpetrated half a century ago upon the "movie moguls" by a bunch of tipsy — but ingenious! — Brits

The fund, incidentally, now stands at something like a billion dollars, and the interest is quite enough, despite the recent setbacks on 'change, to ensure that next year *Mary Mother of God Meets the Vampire Octopus* will be on show at six international festivals and booked by cinemas in Singapore, Punta Arenas, and Ouagadougou. Or whatever.

So now you know.

The noise of the plane's flaps being wound down brought me back to reality again. The P.A. was saying, "We are about to land at London Heathrow. Please extinguish all smoking materials, and ensure your tray-tables and seat backs are in the upright position."

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Numbly complying, I said, "But —!"

"But what? Forgive the vulgarism. However, I don't see what you expect me to add."

The undercarriage dropped with a slam and a thump. I winced, as I always do, and momentarily lost the thread of what I'd meant to say. As though reading my mind, Mr. Secrett said, "Oh, I know! If the fund was supposed to be run anonymously, what was Sir Victor doing making a personal appearance on the set of — Wait a sec! I thought I'd forgotten the title of the film Schlock was working on, but it's coming back to me! It's been so long since I last thought of it. . . ."

He screwed his eyes in concentration, then abruptly snapped his fingers.

"Yes, of course! *Reign of the Blond Atomic Mutants!*" He beamed at me. "Isn't memory an amazing phenomenon?"

Crossly, I said, "What *was* Sir Victor doing putting in a personal appearance?"

"Oh!" Mr. Secrett shrugged his bony shoulders, glancing through the window at West London, barely visible through a blue of midsummer drizzle. "I'd have thought it was obvious. Having been one of the first instigators of the plot, knowing he had only a short time to live, he wanted to see at first hand the impact he and his pals had had. A forgivable lapse, you must admit."

Touchdown. Followed by the roar of engines in full reverse thrust. Followed by the usual injunction to stay put until the plane came to a complete halt at the terminal.

Followed by the usual melee as people rose to pull down their bags from the overhead lockers while we were still rolling.

Contemptuous of such irrational behavior, Mr. Secrett said, "And, of course, given that Schlock had been a devoted Nazi, it afforded Sir Victor especial pleasure to see for himself that the fellow was being made a 'geck and gull.' I felt the same, as a matter of fact."

"I only wish . . . ," he murmured.

"Wish what?"

"I only wish you hadn't told me what a success the festival was at Averno."

I erupted to my feet, almost knocking over another passenger who was struggling past with an illegal amount of hand baggage. "A success?" I

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echoed. "But I told you! It was a flop, a disaster, a catastrophe!"

"Not," he said grimly, "for the organizers."

The aisles still being crammed, I subsided into my seat again. I said after a pause, "Oh."

"Clearly you share my own misgivings. Over the years, recipients of funds intended to hold them and their kind up to public mockery must have managed to salt away sufficient surplus, or lay out enough in bribes, to persuade at least a few people who ought to know better that they deserve to be treated seriously. I fear" — he sighed heavily — "the Averno festival may be but the first of many. And before them now lies the uncharted continent of television."

I was on the point of exclaiming that it was scarcely uncharted any longer, when I remembered that Mr. Secrett has never owned a TV set. It would therefore be pointless to list all the examples tending to support his thesis that my agent had compelled me to watch during the — fortunately brief — period when he was seeking to transform me into a script-writer. That came to an abrupt end when, having striven to introduce a

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modicum of logic into the plot lines handed to me, I was told I was interferring with the "fundamental vision" of the producers.

I wasn't sorry. . . .

"Ah, we're on the move! Excuse me, old man — hope I missed your toe! Glad we bumped into each other! Don't let it be so long before we meet again, will you? You can always reach me at the library. So long!"

And, even though he had been in the window seat, Mr. Secrett was suddenly ten places ahead of me in the line for the exit, with all his belongings in one hand. I haven't seen or spoken to him since.

I watch TV with a different eye these days. I recall Carla's disillusionment at the end of the Averno festival. I try — I know nothing about high finance, or else I might be better off — I *try* to exercise the imagination that Mr. Secrett gives me credit for, striving to visualize the impact on the standard of popular entertainment that might result from the establishment fifty years ago of a fund, now worth over a billion dollars, designed to finance the worst films anybody could conceive.

But I can't outstrip reality. One of my American friends just sent me a clipping from the *Hollywood Chronicle*, thinking it might amuse me. It announces a new picture, just going into production, called *Saved by Our Lord from the Depths of the Dungeon*. I quote: "A PREVIEW OF THE APOCALYPSE AS PROPHESIED BY SAINT JOHN THE DIVINE! SEE THE DRAGONS OF HELL! SEE THE SCARLET WOMAN OF BABYLON! SEE THE DOOM AWAITING THOSE WHO INDULGE IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES! SEE THE RAPTURE THAT WILL RESCUE THE CHOSEN, LEAVING AN EMPTY SEAT BEHIND THE DRIVER'S WHEEL! AND MUCH MORE!"

Of course, it may be a sincere attempt by a wealthy evangelical group to promote the Holy Word. I say may be. I have a sneaking suspicion, however, that I know where the money behind it is most likely to have come from. Thanks to Mr. Secrett.

No, cancel that.

*No* thanks to Mr. Secrett!

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*A. Orr has published two fantasy novels with Tor Books, THE WORLD IN AMBER and IN THE ICE KING'S PALACE, and her first story for F & SF is also fantasy. "Sleeping Anacondas" deals with people who are experts in their professions. But those professions are witchcraft and villainy, both of which can lead to . . . problems.*

# Sleeping Anacondas

**By A. Orr**

THE SUN AND moon were both visible in the sky, never a good sign. But, Sand mused, not necessarily bad either.

He turned from the crumbling stone window casing when he felt a sudden draft behind him, then leaned with his back against the casing and his arms crossed on his chest. It was beneath him to show uneasiness even in the presence of a warlock, but especially in the presence of a warlock who also happened to be a woman, and who, Sand suspected, had gained her reputation on the basis of charms and love potions. He was irritated that his stomach felt knotted and sour.

*So this is what a notorious witch looks like.* He casually surveyed the woman who had entered the room, though she was so old and thin and wrinkled that only the lack of facial hair identified her as female. *Not a very impressive old hag.*

The witch, in turn, showed more candid interest in the smug, dark, unattractive man who slouched against the wall of her room. She examined

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the outlaw's face and figure and suspected that the careless pose disguised coiled muscles and a tense alertness.

"So, Sand," the witch said. "You received my message after all. I was beginning to wonder. You took your time getting here." She moved from the doorway and crossed to the fire, sat in a chair without offering one to him, removed a black and white kitten from the folds of her robe and stroked it absently.

"Your messenger said the matter was important, Hemlock, not urgent. He said nothing about a need for haste." Sand noted that the witch made no sound when she moved: not even her clothes rustled. A good trick, that.

"Did he not? No matter, now that you are here. Since you *are* here, I assume you are accepting the job."

Sand smiled mirthlessly, not a nice smile, and one that did not touch his cold eyes at all. "Perhaps. You want something stolen. Why have me trailed down? I am not an easy man to find, and it crossed my mind that there might be more involved than mere theft if you went to such lengths when thieves are commonly available. I never go into a job blindly. I do not often work for others, and when I do, I must know all the details."

"Mere theft," Hemlock muttered, almost to herself. "Not *mere*, Sand. Major. Or at least to me. Not even theft, strictly speaking, but regaining something that was stolen from me. Or is it that you find thievery beneath you now that you have moved on to murder and assassination?"

Sand lifted a corner of his mouth, neither sneer nor smile, disdaining to reply. *This is a mighty witch! Trying to irritate me with what she thinks are insults. Withered fool.*

Hemlock stared Sand straight in the eyes, levelly and icily, and Sand felt a chill in his bones. He had a shock of dreadful certainty that his thoughts were as clear to the witch as they were to him. To cover his fear, he slouched more, trying to appear as indifferent as possible.

"What is this thing you want stolen? Or regained, if you will."

"An amulet. *My* amulet. One that has been in my possession for a very long time."

"I would think a necromancer of your reputation would have no trouble regaining the thing yourself. Who has taken it? A servant? An apprentice? Or has it only disappeared?"

"Nothing so simple. Another witch has taken it. You may know her name — Woad. She hired someone very like yourself to steal it from me. For various

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reasons that should not concern you, but the foremost of which is the simple fact that I am too old for the undertaking, it is not possible for me to regain the amulet directly, and so the necessity of locating you."

Sand thought a moment, consequences and possibilities clicking into place, each examined or cast aside with the ease of long practice. "I do not care very much for the idea of going uninvited to Woad's lair; she has an evil reputation. If she went to such trouble to steal this amulet from you, then it must be important to her. She has found it *can* be stolen, and so will take extra care to guard it in the event you attempt what you are attempting. Mortal guards should not be too hard to take care of, given they are not numerous, but I think a witch will add some magical guards as well, and those I am not equipped to deal with."

"Yes, there are magical hazards and wards around the thing, but they will not be a difficulty for you. I have seen the amulet in my mind and know full well just which spells surround it. And full well how to nullify them. I have prepared a talisman for you. It will dispense with such spells as you may happen upon — its influence is sufficiently strong to counter what Woad has placed about. The human guards and servants are your responsibility. From your reputation, you should not have any problem disposing of them."

Sand allowed himself a small smile. "No, I do not think so. It sounds rather simple. Too simple for the price your messenger mentioned."

"As I said, the amulet is very important to me. it is of use only to those who know *how* to use it, but unfortunately, Woad does. I am not paying you a minor fortune based merely on the hazards of the theft, but rather on the personally important fact of having the amulet once again in my possession. It is worth it to me."

"Why me, then? It seems any common street thief would do as well, and more cheaply."

"Because I know you by reputation, whereas I do not know any common street thieves. Also, there will be those servants and possibly guards, and not many cut purses are so handy with knife or garrote as you, or so unconcerned about using them."

"The payment?"

Hemlock tossed a small bag onto a nearby table. "That for now. The rest when you bring the amulet."

Sand nodded and crossed to the table, lifted the purse and judged the contents by its weight and the sound it had made. He looked at the old witch.

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"The talisman?"

Hemlock nodded briefly at the table, and when Sand looked, the talisman was lying where the purse had been. Cheap trick. He had seen better at country fairs. He picked it up by the thong and examined it. Not very remarkable-looking to hold the capabilities Hemlock claimed — it looked like only a small triangle of baked clay.

"It will be sufficient," she stated. "Wear it. Its influence will dissipate any of Woad's spells that you encounter."

Sand slipped the thing around his neck and tucked the talisman beneath his jerkin, noticing a sweet, musty smell that came from the fetish.

"And how will I recognize your amulet?"

"It looks like a piece of ice, and is on a gold-colored chain. You will know it. You can find your way to Woad's, I presume."

"Of course, I will have your amulet returned to you within a fortnight."

"Very well." Hemlock thrust the kitten back under her robes, where not even a small bulge in the thin material revealed its presence. She rose and crossed the room, silently, and the heavy door swung open as she approached. Sand sneered quickly at her back, his face relaxing to its customary stony impassiveness as the witch turned to him.

"You may leave now."

Sand was through the door, when the witch said, "The man I sent to find you has not returned. Would you happen to know his whereabouts?"

Turning casually, Sand faced her. "Perhaps he has been distracted by a pair of shapely legs." He thought of the shallow woodland ditch where he had left the messenger lightly covered with leaves..

"Perhaps," Hemlock said slowly, and as she closed her lips over the last syllable, a blue lizard crept from the corner of her mouth, scurried up her face and across an open eye, and then into, Sand would swear, her ear.

Sand was incapable of saying anything further, a condition rare for him. His feet moved without conscious command, and he turned and walked swiftly down the cold hallway, hoping to be out of Hemlock's sight if his knees should give way as they threatened.

He stumbled down the wide stairs and nearly ran across the greatroom, pulled the outer door open and left it gaping behind him.

Not until he was in the deep woods did the outlaw fling himself to the ground, breathing raggedly, his bowels feeling loose.

"More cheap tricks!" he snarled, refusing to admit how thoroughly shaken

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he was. If Hemlock had conjured a demon before him, it would not have terrified him as much as the sight of that lizard and the old woman's calm brown eyes. When his heartbeat felt more normal, he consoled himself by determining that it had been an illusion. Of course the talisman would not affect Hemlock's own spells. If Woad's magic was as shoddy as Hemlock's, and the woman as silly and contemptuous as Hemlock, the thing should be easy.

He thought of the money that awaited him when he had returned the amulet, and set off in an easterly direction that would bring him within the vicinity of Woad.

IN FIVE days' time, he had found the manse squatting lonely against the ragged foot of a hill.

Sand spent a day in the edge of the forest observing the comings and goings of servants, who did not appear to be more in number than was usual. He rested from his journey and fortified himself with cheese and hard bread, waiting for the sun to set.

As the night deepened, more and more of the narrow windows went dark as hangings were lowered against the chill, until only two were left showing light. The light from the lower level was gold and flickering, and Sand knew that it would be cast by the permanent fire in the greatroom.

The second light, visible in the upper level and at the corner of the manse, was steady, bright, and faintly blue, and once in a while an ample figure passed between its source and the window. Sand guessed that room to be the witch's study, and the most obvious place to keep Hemlock's amulet. He need only wait until that window, too, was dark before he began his search. or did witches sleep? And if so, did they sleep in their studies? Sand was not sure a witch could be killed too easily, if it came to that.

Late in the night, long after the covering had been dropped over the greatroom window, the cold blue light was finally extinguished, and Sand slipped toward the manse.

After circling twice to ascertain if there were any more lit rooms or signs of movement, he selected a small, low window and moved silently to it. He listened for a few moments, but could detect no sounds from within, except for small scrabblings that were probably mice.

He pulled himself up to the casement, strong arms easily bearing his body's weight. The room's window had no covering, which indicated that it was probably a storeroom for foodstuffs that must be kept cool. As he wedged

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his shoulders sideways through the window, he caught the sharp smell of cheese and smiled in appreciation of his own skill.

Once inside the room, he lowered himself carefully to the floor and crouched there listening. It was still: even the mice sounds had stopped after an initial scurrying.

Sand placed the blade of a short, curved knife between his teeth and struck tinder to the wick of a candle he had carried in his jerkin. By the soft light of the flame, he surveyed the storeroom: wheels of cheese and slabs of butter rested on the shelves, churns stood in the corner, and pails of milk waited on the floor. He paused long enough to tap a keg of wine and quench his thirst before moving quietly to the door.

He snuffed the candle and tucked it back inside his shirt, and had the knife ready as he eased the door open a crack, wincing when it squeaked. The door opened onto a hallway and, fortunately for Sand, was lit only dimly by guttering candles placed high in the walls.

He glided into the hall, leaving the door to the storeroom slightly open, and kept to the wall as he made his way quickly down the corridor. He paused outside one door when he heard a woman's laughter, but moved on as he heard a man's answering chuckle. He knew the pair within the room were too occupied to be any threat to him.

The hall made a turn, and as he peered around the corner, Sand saw that it ended a short distance away, opening into what would be the greatroom. There was a heavy curtain hanging over the opening, but a space at the bottom revealed the flickering light of the fire in the room beyond. This was the part of his plan he liked least, but the only stairs to the upper portion of the manse would be in the greatroom. There would be too much light in there, and sleeping servants, but Sand had gained a part of his reputation doing this sort of thing.

The muscles in his jaw tightened as he moved to the hanging, listened a moment and heard nothing but snores and the slight rustling of straw as someone turned in his sleep. He pulled the hanging slightly aside, took in the layout of the room with one practiced glance, slipped inside and behind a shadowed chair.

From his position on the floor, he gave the room a more thorough survey. The men and boy servants were sleeping on straw as close as possible to the huge fire, tangled with each other or with the hounds for warmth and comfort. The hounds were the greatest danger to Sand. They might wake at a small

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sound, whereas the servants would not; or smell him, though he counted on the odors of the sleeping bodies to mask his own. This side of the room, he could still flee if he were discovered, but he must cross the room to get to the stairs.

He started edging around the room, keeping against the wall, where the shadows were deeper. He noted everything: which person seemed to be sleeping lightly or troubled, the quick mice rummaging in the dinner remains, the twitching paws of the dreaming hounds. Everything, that is, except the youth sleeping alone in the darkness against the wall.

Sand did not see him until the boy mumbled and stirred and was only a few strides away. He cursed himself silently and froze against the stonework as the servant uncurled and staggered to his feet, tousle-headed and only half-awake. The boy moved a pace away from where he had lain, and braced himself against the wall with one hand, fumbling at his breeks with the other. He was relieving himself against the wall, sighing and closing his eyes, when Sand moved.

Four swift, silent steps was all it took and he had one callused hand over the youth's mouth and had drawn his dagger across the slender throat in less time than it took to blink. The boy didn't make a sound, and Sand lowered him to the floor and crouched next to him, feeling and smelling the mingled warmth of blood and piss, checking the sleeping servants around the fire.

One hound had lifted its muzzle from the floor and was staring at him. Sand tensed, ready to spring back the way he had come, but the dog only continued to stare.

He left the body next to the wall and moved cautiously toward the stairs, keeping constant watch on the hound. It made no sound or movement other than to follow Sand's progress with its eyes. He reached the stairway and started up, keeping to the edge of the treads. Nevertheless, one creaked loudly, and Sand froze again. A few of the sleepers stirred, but none woke, and the dog only continued to watch with placid disinterest.

In the act of rising from one tread to another, Sand glanced up at the head of the stairs. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of what squatted there drooling, but at his involuntary lurch forward, the thing disappeared. Clutching the talisman beneath his shirt, he felt cold sweat run down his sides. He licked his lips and took a deep breath, grimly giving Hemlock a mental nod of acknowledgment. If the talisman's influence could negate *that* horror, then it should work as effectively against whatever else he met.

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At the top of the stairs, the hallway opened out to either side. He took the left-hand corridor and was passing directly under one of the candles, when he heard a door open behind him. Sand leaped for the next patch of darkness and pressed his back to the wall, trying to become invisible.

A plump, pretty, middle-aged woman appeared from the doorway at the farthest end of the hall, holding an oil lamp and clutching a woolen nightdress close at the throat. She walked to the balcony that overlooked the greatroom and stood there gazing down. She shrugged, turned and reentered the room, and closed the door behind her.

Sand let out a cautious breath. That must have been Woad, he thought, and added that this witch was no more powerful-looking than Hemlock, and too comfortable and pretty to be as dangerous as the superstitious fools of the area made her out to be, but he shuddered involuntarily as he remembered a blue lizard. Thank all the old gods that Woad had not noticed the absence of her guard-creature at the stairtop. Or had the thing merely been rendered ineffectual in the talisman's presence, and re-materialized as that presence was removed? No matter. Either way, he was safe.

As the outlaw approached the door to the study, he noticed a faint tracery of blue light lines hovering just above its surface. The color gained intensity as he approached, and the lines seemed to be weaving themselves into a tighter pattern, but he pulled out the talisman and thrust it toward the door, and all sign of the light vanished. Child's play.

He lit his candle once inside the room, and with it lit some lamps that were perched about on tables. There was no sign of anything that could have made the cold, steady light he had seen earlier from the forest. It was a disquieting room, and Sand did not want to spend more time in it than necessary. There was an oddly shaped shadow in one corner that should not have held a shadow, and it did not disappear when Sand held the talisman toward it and then backed warily away. The shadow did not move or change, but Sand kept a careful eye on it as he searched the room.

Thinking Hemlock's precious amulet would at least be shut away somewhere, Sand spent a few moments opening boxes and quickly shutting them when he saw their contents. He was reluctantly reaching for another box, when something shiny caught his eyes. It was a chain, and when he pulled it, the amulet came with it, hidden beneath some carelessly tossed parchments.

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Sand studied it, determining that the chain was too strong to be gold but still looked valuable. The amulet itself was unremarkable except that it looked wet and was not. It was not even the size of a quarter of Sand's palm, irregular in shape, and a sort of translucent white. Actually, as Hemlock had said, it looked like nothing so much as a lump of ice, and gave off the same coldness. He pulled the chain over his head and tucked the amulet under his shirt with the talisman. The first touch of it against his skin pierced him with cold, and he did not like the feel of it resting there on his chest, but it warmed, and that was the safest place to carry it.

Smiling, Sand unlooped the hempen rope that was tied to his belt, fixed one end to the leg of a heavy table, and flicked the other end out the window. He slid down the rope to the ground and faded into the forest, chuckling to himself at the simplicity of the whole escapade and at the ineptness of notorious witches. In the study, the shadow detached itself from the wall and went to report to its mistress.

HE WAS two days' walk away from Woad's lair, when he began to feel sick: dizzy and weak. He sidetracked long enough to break into a farmhouse and eat heartily, and was feeling slightly better when he resumed his journey to Hemlock. Before the sun set that night, though, he was worse. Diarrhea had added to his misery, and no matter how much water he drank, he could not seem to slake his thirst. Incautiously, he made a large fire that night and lay shivering next to it, cursing himself and the wine he had taken at Woad's.

By the time he reached Hemlock, he was nearly staggering from weakness, and his belly felt as if nails had been driven into it, but he was making plans to recuperate in the nearest whorehouse on the old woman's money.

He sat there shaking before the fire in Hemlock's greatroom, waiting for the witch to come down to him.

"You have it, then?"

Sand started when she spoke at his back, recovered his poise with a great deal of effort, and stood to greet her.

"Yes, of course. It was a simple thing." He reached for the chain around his neck, but before he could remove the amulet, he was struck with an awful, rending pain in his chest. Sand clutched his chest and fell to his

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knees, gasping, wondering that pain could be so complete and overwhelming, and then found himself on his back, unable to move or speak, the pain gone but replaced with a weakness that left him absolutely helpless.

Hemlock knelt next to his shoulders and pulled the amulet from around his neck, letting his head crack cruelly on the floor. She held it up and smiled slowly, stroking the amulet, which was now red instead of the transparent white. Sand watched through involuntary tears: he did not even have the strength to blink them away.

Hemlock put the chain around her neck and patted it fondly, pulled out a stool, and sat staring down at Sand.

"Well, you see, Sand. This is how it is. I am afraid you will not get to spend your money. You are going to die very soon."

Sand was not even surprised. He had thought the terrible pain alone was enough to kill him, but the debilitating lethargy that crouched in every part of his body felt like death itself.

"Why?" Hemlock echoed the question in Sand's fading eyes. "Very simple. This amulet is named the Sleeping Anaconda. You do, I presume, know what to do if you happen across a sleeping serpent? You let it sleep, naturally. For waking, they may bite, and once an anaconda has its teeth in your flesh, you are doomed. You cannot break its hold. They will squeeze you to death, yes, but the purchase for the constriction is gained from the bite. Even the most harmless-appearing things harbor hidden strengths and dangers. I would have expected you to know that."

Hemlock took the time to pour herself a glass of wine and take a few measured sips, all the while looking at Sand with amused contempt. She produced the kitten from her robes again, and it, too, stared down at the outlaw.

"This amulet, once it leaves a witch's presence, must feed. So you see why I could not very well retrieve it myself, lest it feed upon me. The world will not miss you, Sand. You have been an evil man, but the strength of your evil was exactly what my Anaconda required. I do thank you for returning it, though. And now, you die."

Sand did. The life flicked out of him as quickly as if it were some spell dissipated by the talisman he still wore beneath his shirt.

Hemlock stroked the ruby-glowing amulet and smiled down at Sand's blank stare.

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*Woad?*

*Yes, my old friend, I am here.*

*It has returned. I hope you will not be wanting to borrow it again for quite some time, my dear. Now I have a body to dispose of. How did you get rid of the body of the man who brought it to you?*

*I did not get rid of it; I used it. You should learn to be more frugal with such resources, Hemlock.*

*You are right, but my work does not use such resources as often as does yours. By the way, how many servants are you minus?*

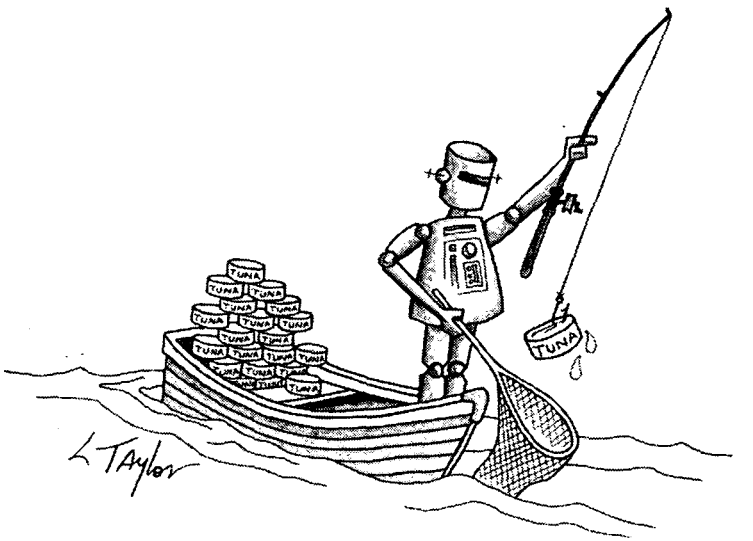
*Only one, but I was rather fond of the boy. Did you like the few spells I placed in Sand's path?*

*Not up to your usual standards, but sufficient to forestall any misgivings our outlaw may have had. Pity about your servant. Would you allow me to replace him for you?*

*Yes, I would.*

*Very well. You will be hearing from me soon. Just now, with the Anaconda so freshly and strongly fed, I have a few studies for it. Keep well, my friend.*

*And you, Hemlock.*

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# FILMS

## HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 34: *In Which We Praise Those Whose Pants're On Fire, Noses Long as a Telephone Wire*

RIGHT AROUND World Series time last Fall, readers of these columns in California, Oregon, Nevada and Washington, also Hawaii, suffered mild cognitive dissonance when they turned on their television sets and saw Your Obedient Servant as on-camera spokesman in a series of Chevrolet commercials, extolling the virtues of a line of Japanese-designed, American-built cars called the Geo Imports. In these sixty- and thirty-second mini-encounters, as I walk through an elegant museum setting, the super that flashes across my body says *Harlan Ellison*, and under the name appear the words *Noted Futurist*.

This designation — however marginally appropriate — however startling to, say, Isaac Asimov or Alvin Toffler or Roberto Vacca, who are commonly held to be both futurists and noted as such — was the appellation of choice of Chevrolet, its West Coast advertising agency, and the director, Mr. Terry Galanoy.

Friends, acquaintances and casual thugs (who suggest I was selected for these commercials not on the basis of charisma or ability, but because I make the cars look larger), have expressed some startlement at my having been labeled *Noted Futurist*. "What the hell does that mean?" they codify their confusion, further asking, "Why did they call you that?"

To which I respond: "It seemed to Chevrolet that it was a more trustable identification than *Paid Liar*."

As creator of fictions, I have

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frequently referred to myself as a *Paid Liar*; that is, a storyteller; one who receives monies from publishers and moviemakers for cobbling up what Vonnegut called *foma*, "harmless untruths." Thus, a paid liar in the context of dreaming fantastic dreams . . . not (he said very sternly, looking them straight in the eye) in any way suggesting that what I say about the Geo Imports is less than the absolute truth, spoken with conviction and sincerity. (It is not my intention to get into discussion of these commercials, why I did them, or the astonishing effect their airing has had on Susan's and my life, save to assure you that I would not present myself as spokesman for a product in which I did not believe. The cars are excellent, I drive them myself, they are remarkably responsible environmentally-speaking at 53 mpg in the city and 58 in the country, and I added this aside *only* to avoid the gibes of those who would purposely misinterpret the term *Paid Liar* in conjunction with the commercials.)

Pushkin said: "Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths."

The great liars of narrative literature remain, from century to century, some of our most treasured teachers. The truly great ones come along all too infrequently, and if we manage to get one every other generation we feel that our lot is salutary. Mary Shelley, Poe, Borges, Kafka, Bierce, James Branch Cabell, Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, John Collier, Roald Dahl, Fritz Leiber . . . these are the transcendentally untruthful, the paid liars who, like Mark Twain and Jules Verne, shine a revelatory light — through the power-source of invention — on our woebegone and duplicitous world. Through noble mendacity, enlightenment!

As Isaac Bashevis Singer has said, "When I was a little boy, they called me a liar, but now that I'm grown up, they call me a writer."

In the late 1700s, the hands-down titleholder of the belt for prevarication, flyweight, middle- and welterweight, cruiser-, bruiser- and heavyweight, was Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, the Baron von Munchausen. Recounting his no-less-than-eyeopening exploits as a cavalry officer in the service of Frederick the Great against the ravaging, pillaging, bestial Ottoman Empire, Munchausen (1720-97) erected towers of tales so tall they dwarfed Babel or Trump. Behind his back, his drinking companions rolled their eyes and called him *Lungenbaron*, the lying Baron; but one of them, Rudolf Erich Raspe, hied himself to England where, in 1785, he wrote and caused to have

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published BARON MUNCHAUSEN'S NARRATIVE OF HIS MARVELOUS TRAVELS AND CAMPAIGNS IN RUSSIA, a book instantly a bestseller.

The tales contained in that volume can be counted among the biggest lies ever wafted on hot air across our planet. Or so we must believe. Who could impart even a scintilla of truth to the anecdotes of a man who swore he had been blown by hurricane to the Moon, had enjoyed carnal knowledge of the goddess Venus while visiting in the bowels of Mt. Etna, had been swallowed by a Monstro-the-whale like sea beast and had escaped by dint of Balkan snuff, and asserted, "On another occasion I wished to jump across a lake. When I was in the middle of the jump, I found it was much larger than I had imagined at first. So I at once turned back in the middle of my leap, and returned to the bank I had just left, to take a stronger spring." Add a large question mark to the end of that last sentence.

Filmmakers took the Baron to their bosom from the start. His adventures have been chronicled on celluloid more than a dozen times, from 1909 (as far as we know) to the classic Méliès version in 1911 to the legendary two-reelers of the 1930s, to the charming and sweethearted 1961 Czech fantasy filled with loopy special effects, as conceived, co-scripted and directed by Karel Zeman.

But only Méliès, one of the great Paid Liars of all time, could claim a breadth of imagination capable of lying up to the level of the Baron. The others were mere fibbers. Talented, but hardly in that ballpark of audacity. Dilettantes. Pishers.

It is our happy lot to be blessed in these days of inept lying (as exemplified by the recently ended Presidential campaign) with one of the great, consummately eloquent diegesists, a falsifier of such singular abilities that he rivals the Baron in ability to make the jaw drop; and like Méliès, his medium is movies. He is, of course, ex-Python Terry Gilliam. And just around Eastertime, Columbia Pictures will release his most magnificent lie to date, THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN.

And if ever there was one destined to assume the mantle of the Baron, it is Gilliam. He has become a shoo-in for the Whopper Teller's Hall of Fame. He is a world-class liar whose potential value to us as a teller of truth through tommyrot ranks with that credited to Scheherazade, Don Marquis, and the nameless whiffle-merchants who cobbled up Paul Bunyan, the Loch Ness Monster and the Bible.

Gilliam's new film, the final

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third of the trilogy begun with *Time Bandits* (1981) and *Brazil* (1985) is a two hour and seven minute string of shameless lies — edited by Gilliam from its initial 2:41 length — that will make you roar with laughter, disbelieve what you're seeing, and have you clapping your hands in childlike delight. It is:

A carnival! A wonderland! A weekend with nine Friday nights! Terry Gilliam's lavish dreams are beyond those of mere mortals. *Munchausen* is everything you secretly hope a movie will be. What most movies turn out not to be: adequate or exceeding your expectations.

In this column, three years ago, I urged you not to miss *Brazil*, one of the exceptional fantasies of all time. Compound that enthusiasm by an order of ten and you may begin to approach my delight in alerting you to *Munchausen*. Every frame is filled to trembling surface tension with visual astonishments so rich, so lush, so audacious, that you will beg for mercy. As with *Brazil*, a film that despised moderation and was thus mildly disparaged by stiff-necked critics incapable of the proper sybaritic gluttony for sensory overload, *Munchausen* simply will not quit. Like Cool Hand Luke or Joe Namath at the end of the '76 season, it won't stay down for the count. It keeps coming at you, image after image, ferocious in its fecundity of imagination, wonder after wonder, relentless in its desire to knock your block off!

It is a great and original artist's latest masterwork of joy, and despite reports that it has opened in Europe to tepid box office, it is a film that lives up to everything the Baron tried to put over on us. It is — without tipping one delight you deserve to savor fresh and on your own — one of the most wonderful fims I've ever seen. And I ain't lying.

ANCILLARY MATTERS: (The following taken *in toto* from an item by Steven Smith in the *Los Angeles Times* of 8 January.)

Remember back in 1985, when director Terry Gilliam battled MCA-Universal prez Sid Sheinberg over the final cut of Gilliam's Orwellian comedy, *Brazil* . . . and won? Well, maybe he didn't.

Universal released Gilliam's 131-minute version to numerous raves and a best picture award from the L.A. Film Critics Assn., albeit to lackluster box office.

But last week, a 93-minute version of *Brazil* aired on KTLA Channel 5 as part of a Universal syndicated tv package — promoting it with raves actually written about the original.

But scenes have been recut and rescored, using new takes and dialogue dubbed by sound-alike actors.

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The story — about a clerk who escapes a repressive society through fantasy, but is finally lobotomized — was changed and simplified, with a new, happy ending assembled from unused footage. Elaborate dream sequences now total 47 seconds.

Who's responsible?

Sheinberg hadn't returned calls by press time. But the new *Brazil* closely follows the "radical rethink" devised three years ago by Sheinberg, as described since by two film editors hired to make the changes.

Gilliam, reached in London and apprised of the altered state of his movie, told us: "It's wonderful, because it gives Sid a chance to break into tv. The only sad thing is, the world doesn't get to appreciate that Sid made this film."

Late last year, Gilliam said, Universal asked for his "input" on the latest edit (he declined) — and that the studio wouldn't let him remove his name.

Now, he added, "They're selling it as *Brazil*, the film that won best picture, and that's nonsense."

There is a special sea of boiling hyena vomit in the deepest and darkest level of Hell, tenanted thus far only by those who burned the Great Library of Alexandria, by the dolt who bowdlerized LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER, and by those who have torn down elegant art deco buildings to erect mini-malls. It is my certain belief that Sid Sheinberg will sizzle there throughout eternity. Standing on Ted Turner's shoulders.

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# Coming Soon

Next month: "The Sin-Eater of the Kaw" a compelling new novelet by Bradley Denton, about the strange relationship between a young woman and a homeless man. Also, a new Kedrigern story by John Morressy.

Soon: Watch this space for news about a special 40th Anniversary issue, coming along this Fall. Send us the subscription coupon on page 16 and make sure that you won't miss this issue.

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*Dave Poyer was educated at Annapolis; after seven years at sea he left the Navy to write. He edited COMMAND AT SEA (Naval Institute Press) and has published several SF novels, including THE DEAD OF WINTER (Tor) and STEPFATHER BANK (St. Martin's). Mr. Poyer's first F&SF story is a fast paced tale about a Washington neurosurgeon who is called on to treat a remarkable patient.*

# BEFORE ALL, DO NO HARM

**By D. C. Poyer**

SHE STOOD IN A DARK PHONE booth in a darkened bar. Behind her the jukebox whined about love and loss, and men's voices sniggered at a fumble on the tube. Two of them had called to her on her way to the back. She hated them. The telephone purred discreetly into her ear. At the third ring, someone picked it up. "Four three nine seven," a guarded male voice said.

"Mr. Racker, please."

"Dr. Kendrick? We've been hoping you would call. Where are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I have something important to tell you."

And the distant voice said, "The recorder is on. Go ahead, Olivia."

Full of hatred, she began to speak.

Dr. Olivia Kendrick was approaching the five-mile mark when the helicopter made it first pass overhead.

The green water of the C&O Canal edged her path. To her left, down

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a bank and through a thin stand of oak and vine, the Potomac shone greenish-muddy at spring high. The hard-packed sand gave deliciously under her Nike Airs. As she passed the milepost, she glanced at the Rolex Chronometer Senator Levin had given her after his shunt: 49:00 even, better than ten minutes per mile, with two yet to go.

*Not too bad for a middle-aged lady with two feet of plastic in her chest.* As she thought of it, the scar itched. Beneath the George Washington U. sweatshirt, it writhed hidden but never forgotten between her breasts, an immense red welt where she had been split open and stitched back together two years before. A double coronary bypass was no joke, not at forty-three.

She was thinking with regret of that last cigarette, not so much smoked as devoured just before the holothane came down, when the glint and sound came again through the trees. This time she saw the words *United States of America* in silver against the midnight blue of fuselage. And this time it was low. Grit and dust blasted up off the trail as the aircraft roared over at fifty feet. The Saturday-afternoon runners and bikers scattered, waving their fists and screaming at it. As it neared her, it tilted suddenly and seemed to freeze in space. As she slowed, she saw someone in the curved transparent bubble pointing down at her.

"DR. KENDRICK?" The voice amplified, enormous even over the earsplitting whine of turbines.

When she waved, the thing rotated on its axis and began to settle. It was cleverly done: when the wheels hit the trail and bounced, there were only feet left between the rotor tips and the trees, and the outboard skid teetered over green water. She waited till the hatch popped, and then ran in, ducking the blades.

"Where did they take him?"

"What?"

"You know who, damn it; don't play games with—"

But then she saw that the man in the copilot's seat was not Colonel Schroeder, the president's physician. She took in the gray uniform, the double-chinned face with stubble of black, the huge holstered revolver and tanned paw over ten-gallon hat.

"You're Dr. Kendrick?"

"Yes."

"Get in. You're needed across the river."

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"The hell I will!" She backed off, looking around for possible help.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," said the man in the hat. "We've got a case for you."

"Who?"

"Someone important."

"Not the Joker?"

"No."

"That's the only person I'm on call for. There're other neurosurgeons in the world. Baines is good; you've got Goldman at Bethesda—"

She stopped talking then, and looked up the bore of that enormous gun.

The pilot reached forward then from beside the paunchy man and slapped it down. The brief wrestle ended abruptly when the engines wound up again. The gun disappeared, and the pilot leaned out past the lawman, who had flushed under the tan. "Hey, 'Livy."

"Oh, it's you, Hank. Who's this nut?"

"This is a federal marshal. We got a hot one, Doc. Code 'Pinocle.'"

"That's only for one man in this country."

"Trust me, good-lookin', we got his initials on the order."

Maybe that was what did it. Olivia Kendrick had not thought of herself as good-looking since one shining moment at sixteen. But she zipped up her joggies and climbed in, managing an elbow in the fat man's side, and settled in the bucket behind the pilot. When her belt clacked, the copter was already leaping upward, momentarily doubling her 160 pounds. The miles-long shining ribbon of the canal dropped away, and the Potomac opened out, then beyond it the white shaft of the Memorial, the new skyscrapers of Arlington, the sandstone sprawl of the Pentagon. For a moment she thought they were heading for it, but then the plane rotated and they headed west. Whatever was going on, it was urgent. Leaning forward, she saw the Hughes was redlined at over three hundred miles an hour.

*She is the dream. The pearl of tortured imagination, the mythoclastic alpha/omega who disproves the equation humanity=mortality. To our tranced perception, she sways glistening in Danae's shower. Her contemplation transcends our apple-knowledge of loss and pain. With the cruelest, most recent fold of forebrain, we know no one is as she seems. Yet,*

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*though we know her illusion, know her reified only by our ignorance and emotion, we still call her Celeste or Astarte, Joan, Rebekah, Mary; call her with greedy folly friend, lover, wife. But bubbled Eros lofts in hostile air. Be it soon or late, the lover will one da, resee his beloved, not nude indeed, for that but clothes her in different kind, but as absence — as* forever gone. . . .

Their destination was closer than she expected, but still unknown to her. Before the edge of roof sliced away their view, her eye caught barbed wire, acres of woods (*inside* the Beltway?). Then she was following the marshal down an empty corridor waxed so slick she could see her face at her feet. She jogged to catch up.

"So we're here. Now, explain."

"Like I said, we got a patient for you."

"Tell me more," she said, trying to recall who was in town. The paper this morning — Komarov wasn't due for weeks yet, even if the negotiations proceeded well —

"We don't know any more."

"We? Hell, who are *you*?"

"Name's Durrell. Federal marshal, Gold Flat, Nevada."

"*Nevada*!"

"That's what I said."

"What are you doing in D.C.? *What the hell is this*?" she said again.

Durrell looked her up and down. "Look, lady. You may be hot shit in the medical world, but get one thing straight. This is not your show. You're here the same way I am — as an employee of the U.S. government."

She stopped. "Is that right? Let me straighten you out on something right now, Mr. Cowboy. I happen to be a civilian. And if I'm not treated right, I may just decide to tell you to cram your patient, whoever he is, up your fat *sphincter ani internus*."

They glared at each other for a moment longer; then Durrell muttered something under his breath and went on. At a door, he flashed his badge at a man in a blue silk tie and gray suit cut full around the shoulders. He shielded the lock as he pressed in a combination. The door buzzed open after a moment, and she stopped just within.

Isolation.

*Heavy* isolation. She was looking at a G-type bacteriological lock-in.

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They were on the far side of the air lock, but, through three layers of glass, she could see strip facilities, showers, UV chamber, and, dimly beyond that, what looked like a fully equipped intensive-care facility.

But the funny thing was, she knew — had known — that there was nothing like this within five hundred miles of the capital.

Plastic crackled as she adjusted the mask. Beside her, unseen, the marshal passed his hand over a light. When the glare of ultraviolet died, she opened her eyes to a polyurethane veil.

"This way." Durrell's grunt was muffled by the full suit and face mask.

On the far side of the second air lock, a man waited for them. When he turned, she blew out relief. The situation was suddenly less crazy.

"Hello, Olivia," said the little man, grinning up at her.

She had seen Tony Liguri last in Denver, at the congress there, presenting a paper on T-cell disablement in AIDS. He was a fraction under four feet tall, and one of the best theoretical virologists around. His little hand felt strange but welcome through two layers of polyethylene.

"Tony, am I glad to see you. What's going on? They about burned out one of Prayin' Pat's choppers getting me here."

"We've got an interesting case."

"Tell me about it."

Liguri pouted. "Not much I can tell you — you'd do better to tell me, after you look. Patient's about twenty years old. Crash trauma, coma; I suspect cranial infarction."

"What else?"

"I'd rather have you see her."

"Her? O.K."

They went through plastic curtains into the next room, and once again she stopped. Then she went the rest of the way in and sat down next to the bed, oblivious of the two men behind her, of the hiss of an oxygen bleed and of the filtered air that surrounded her sealed-off self, of the glowing screens of the EKG and EEG across the bed. She was studying the patient.

The face on the pillow was younger than Liguri had said. She'd have called it at eighteen. Skin sallow beneath tan or light pigmentation. Hawaiian? Puerto Rican? Indian? Definitely neither Caucasian nor black. Bandage over the left parietal area. Pulse slow, breathing ditto. Kendrick lifted her eyes. The EEG said deep coma, all right. Heart pattern good,

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though. She peeled back an eyelid, then the other. Oddly, not a trace of cyanosis, and the pupils looked normal.

"What's the history?" she muttered, frowning.

Liguri cleared his throat. "Well, maybe I'll let Marshall Durrell address that."

She glanced over her shoulder, noting with distaste that the fat man was still wearing the gun under his dress-out. He blinked at her from a chair. "Well?"

"She was found in an aircraft wreck."

"Go on."

"There were head injuries."

"I can see that, Sheriff. What did the physician on the scene say?"

"I'm a marshal. Physician? Wasn't any."

"You mean . . . well, who put the dressings on?"

"I did," giggled Liguri. "Been a long time since I worked on a macro scale. To me, anything bigger than twenty microns, it's like giving first aid to a whale. But it's not a *bad* job, is it?"

"You mean no one else has seen her? That's criminal!"

"You're here," grunted Durrell.

She ignored that. "Are there X rays yet?" she asked Liguri.

"Yes." The virologist knocked at a divider, and a nurse came out from behind it. Kendrick's eyes followed her as she crossed the room, noticing her walk. Their eyes met as she passed the film, and Olivia smiled. The nurse dropped her eyes and left.

"Let's see . . . oh, Mongolian sutures, I wondered where she was from . . . hm." She clipped the black squares to a light box and studied them for some time. At last she looked at Liguri.

"Am I right?" he asked her anxiously.

"You're right. It must have been a hell of a crash."

"I thought so, but you know—"

"Yes. What's the external picture?"

"She must have hit a hard edge, metal. Scalp is torn down to the bone. No penetration, though."

"Good. Less chance of infection. Blood type?"

"Uh . . . O-neg."

"Other injuries?"

"Broken ribs, heavy bruising in the chest area."

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"Heart?"

"Functions seem O.K. Of course, I'm a little rusty—"

"The EKG looks strong, Tony; she's young enough I'm not going to worry about it. Potassium? How are the blood tests?"

"Histamine's high, but consistent with damage."

"Well, she looks all right. For the moment."

"Are you going to operate?" asked Durrell.

She ignored him and went back to studying the X rays. "Well," she said at last, "it looks tough but straightforward. Why did you need me for this? It's deep, but there are other brain-butchers in town."

"You're the best," said Liguri.

"Thanks, but. . . ."

"Are you going to operate?" said the marshal again.

She slapped the film down and rounded on him. "Tony, can't you get Marshal Dillon here out of my face? Or better yet, pony him off into the sunset?"

"Look, I don't have to take this—"

"Neither do I."

"Please," said Liguri, looking upset. "Let me explain, Livia. Officer Durrell has not been totally frank."

"Yes, that seems to be a difficulty with him."

"It was not an 'aircraft crash.'"

"Well, what was it?"

Neither man answered. "Oh Jesus," said Kendrick after a moment. "Is this one of those hidden-camera things?"

"I wish it were. It happened in Nevada. West of the Skull Mountain site — where they test the bombs. This time they were testing one of the Star Wars railguns. It seems—"

"I don't want to hear it, Tony."

"They pulled three bodies out. Two of them—"

"You boys have got to start finishing your sentences. Two of them were *what*?"

"Well, we couldn't really tell," said Liguri.

"And this one?"

"It looks normal," said the immunologist. "At least on the surface. But when you look at the subcellular level. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"At the subcellular level, what?"

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"It's strange," said the immunologist. "I mean, they're human cells, all right. Real nice ones. Too nice. There're no viruses in there. And the lymphocytes look — funny."

"Isolation?"

"If you could raise a human being in complete isolation, you wouldn't have viruses in the stream, no. Like David, the bubble boy in Texas. One Epstein-Barr virus killed him. But even he had mitochondria. They're—"

"I know what they are. I know surgeons are just mechanics to you, Tony, but we can read. Encapsulated viruses the cells captured ages ago and tamed. Everybody's got 'em."

Liguri nodded toward the bed. "She doesn't."

"That's impossible."

"Livia, I *looked.* There are other structures there, they may fulfill the function, but they're intrinsic — not symbionts. I'm waiting for the electron-mike workup."

There was nothing she could say to that. They stared at each other through plastic.

"Are you going to operate?" asked Durrell again.

There, she knew the answer to that. And it took only two short words.

The PETT scan was a patter of color like an oil swirl in the sunlight. She sat alone in the cubicle and laid the five of them out, the head from five angles, and looked at them for a long time in silence.

Now that she knew, a thousand strange tongues whispered to her from them. X rays showed soft tissue only as a light gray, undifferentiated, mute to the eye. But Positron Emission Transaxial Tomography was a map of heat. It sliced section by section like a CAT scan, but more sensitively; by tracing temperature differentials, it showed how the brain was processing the chemical reactions that were the key to tragedies, technologies, the intellectualized war that was chess, or the sweaty beauty of ballet. But this was no normal brain. She stared tranced at the film. Much of what she saw, she could not interpret. She felt like one of Wright's mechanics ordered to repair a Stealth bomber.

But what scared her most was, it was *cold.*

Ninety percent of this brain was from five to seven degrees below normal body temperature. And Liguri, in the workup, had found the overall temperature of their patient was only slightly over eighty. Hypo-

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thermia . . . but he had done nothing to lower it. It was as if that were normal. But it couldn't be — she knew that. Muscle tissue wouldn't work, not well, nor would digestion or respiration or a hundred other processes mammals had to carry out minute by minute to go on living.

And there were subtler problems. The other 10 percent of the brain flared out in brilliant yellow amid the greens and blues. It was over a hundred degrees. Twenty degrees difference within four inches of brain tissue!

She rubbed between her thighs where the running had chafed them, and wished for a cigarette. It was good at least to get out of the plastic suit. Then she wished for a drink. She thought of the nurse then and pushed the button on the wall.

The woman came in several seconds later. She stood in the doorway waiting.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Kendrick."

"My name is Linda. Linda Freed."

"Nice to meet you. You're an RN, of course?"

"Yes, OR- and intensive-qualified."

"That's excellent; I'm glad to hear that. Look, Linda, I'm a little nervous. Do we have anything around?"

"I have Percodan, Quaaludes, and Pentothal; Valium, and then we have the new—"

"May I have a Valium, please."

"Certainly, Doctor."

When she brought it, their hands met, and then their eyes, and Olivia thought, Oh now. Is she one of us? But aloud, she said only, "You're very pretty."

"Thank you."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Johns Hopkins. I stayed there after graduation."

"Do you know Vera Quain — she's in the nursing faculty, I think."

"Dr. Quain? Yes, I had her in Bacteriology. She's very good."

"Yes. She is. Did you know her well?"

"No. Just in the classroom."

"I see. Did you take these scans yourself?"

"Yes. I'm qualified on all the equipment here."

"By the way, where is 'here?' I don't even know what town I'm in."

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"You're in Maclean, Doctor. This is a Company facility."

"I thought as much. Well, I'm very glad to have you working with Tony and me on this, Linda."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"My name is Olivia."

"Thank you, Olivia."

When she was gone, Kendrick put her hand on her heart. It thudded away, a little fast, but good, strong. Hang in there, she encouraged it. No more cigarettes for Livy. No more wine and pasta feasts. Weight below 160, and six miles every other day. Hang in there, you damned greasy muscle.

But she was such a *good-looking* little nurse. . . .

She frowned and, picking up a magnifier, turned again to the film. But she did not see it. Instead, her mouth had taken on a tortured, distant smile.

IT HAD happened years before, when she first came to Washington. On Wisconsin Avenue, south of G. One of the lounges that no one from out of town found, that advertised only in the alternate tabloids of Takoma Park and Adams-Morgan. She had heard about it from a casual friend. Inside an anonymous and unsigned door, she found dark-painted wooden booths and a counter bar. The light had been dim, but she could see that, yes, this was the Friday-night action in Georgetown. An adjoining room was honeycombed with dark alcoves surrounding a dance floor, all stuffed with tables and women. She wedged herself into a booth (she was in her heavy phase then, working too much and drinking too much, too) and ordered a martini and lit a Salem.

It was disco. A burly woman kept the turntable hot. The dance floor, flickering with colored light, was packed like cells beneath a microscope. I didn't know there were this many of us in town, she thought. I've been out of things too long. Med school, ten years of it, internship, practice, no time for love even after she had accepted, finally, what kind she needed.

Out of it too long. She studied the dancers. Nearly everyone was in jeans, the tighter the better. Not a single dress, not even culottes. No chests — was everyone restrained, bound? Those with long hair wore it to the collars of their plaid shirts. The lumberjack look was in, masculine, narrow-hipped, casual. Yet there was variation. There were blacks. One

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Oriental. Women of all ages, from teen to gray-haired. She thought she saw one male, but found dimorphism an unreliable aid.

Her stockiness, her frumpy skirt and blouse, were out of place. But she did not feel unwelcome.

"Hi. Are you — dancing?"

She was unhealthily thin, intense-looking, with dark eyes and the longest, blackest hair in the room. Olivia speared her olive, taken aback. It was hard to change so suddenly from observer to participant. Then she decided.

"Sure."

"I'm Celeste."

"Call me Livia."

"O.K., sure, let's get on the floor."

Olivia stopped then, stopped herself consciously and finally from going on with remembering the rest of it. Yet, below her frozen consciousness, it played remorselessly on. The community. The softball team. Escorting confused, fearful women through the lines of picketers to the clinic, shielding them from those who cried, "murderer," "baby-killer." And above all, Celeste: intense, spacey, confused Celeste, ricocheting from straight to bi, submerging or indulging her guilt in hashish and alcohol and anorexia and a promiscuity that had in it too much of denial. Before meeting Olivia, she had lived with a born-again trucker. She was so unlike Livy Kendrick that the bond, like epoxy and hardener, grew stronger with stress and time. Olivia had gradually realized that what Celeste wanted was not to decide, but to be told; to be ordered; sometimes, to be forced. They quarreled and cried together and parted and could not hold out, and then at last moved in together in a condo a block from the Watergate. Olivia had gotten her off everything but wine, and she was making progress in a women's therapy group. And, as one month, then another passed, she had gradually dared to hope that this once it might last longer than a time; might last, this time, for good.

Then, late one night in the raucous Georgetown Halloween, they had been caught under the Key Bridge, together, by five bikers from Mississippi.

She had called her once a week after the operation. A male voice had answered, and then she waited, waited, till she heard the familiar haunted whisper: "Who is it?"

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"Celeste, it's Livy. I made it. Or so they say."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, darling. I just want to — I need to see you. Can't you come over here? I'm all alone here—"

"Olivia, *I can't see you anymore. Or any of the girls.*"

"Babe, wait. Let's talk this out. I know you're involved with this guy again—"

"I'm marrying him, Livy. I'm joining his church."

She held the phone in shock; unable, really, to speak; but she had to, she knew, now, or hear the click of final disconnect. "I really can't see you," the shy, rapid voice said again.

"I'm — happy for you, babe, if that's what you want. Really. Celeste, listen. I'm in a hospital bed. All I need is sympathy."

"We can't be friends. It hurts too much. I can't do it."

"Babe—"

A male voice in the background. Then Celeste's, hasty, almost a whisper. Then she came back on. "I can't talk now. Don't call me anymore, Doctor. No, wait, Brad—"

And then a voice, heavy, aggressive, masculine: "Who is this?"

"Just a friend, a friend of—"

"You heard her. She doesn't want to talk to you. Prey on somebody else, you dyke bitch."

"Take care of her," Olivia whispered into the dial tone; then, laying her head back, let the tears begin.

Two months later she had read about the overdose in the *Post*.

*She is the dream. . . .*

"'Scuse me, Miz Kendrick."

She looked up from her hands, into the mirror. "You always barge into the ladies' john like this, Durrell?"

"There's only one can. It's as much mine as it is yours."

"Enjoy it. I'm leaving."

"Just a minute. I want to talk to you."

She bumped a button and chafed her palms under hot air. "So talk."

The marshal sighed and leaned against a partition. "Look," he said, raising his voice above the whine, "I've got to make reports on this thing. People upstairs are on my ass. What do you intend to do?"

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The blower cut off, but Olivia continued rubbing her hands as she considered the question. She said slowly, "First I need to understand what I'm getting into."

"Dr. Liguri thinks we need to operate."

"He's a little ahead of the play."

"That mean you're not going to?"

"As I said, I need to know more. You seem to think neurosurgeons tear in there with a saw and jerk out whatever doesn't belong. It's not that simple, not in the cerebrum. At least, I think that's the cerebrum. Hell of a big one if it is. But that infarction — the clot — it's deep. It's near a complex knot of major arteries. Even in a normal case, I'd be cautious going in there. You could end up with a vegetable on your hands very easily. And for — her, I know so little about structure, I may not go in at all."

"Not go in? You have to. She's —"

"Listen. There happens to be an old medical precept, Marshal, that applies here: 'Before all, do no harm.' That is, if you don't know what you're doing, you have no business doing anything at all."

"Then what happens?"

"She may die."

"But, damn it, then you've got to go in!"

"No. I said, *may*. What's the big hurry, anyway?"

"The people outside are reading the instruments, too. Their doctors recommend unanimously that you do it."

"That's a flat-out lie, Durrell. They'd think the same way I would. No, there's another reason. What is it?"

The marshal edged off the wall. "You said I'm lying?"

"Didn't you hear me? If you don't like it, don't do it. You're not very good at it anyway."

Durrell hesitated. At last he said angrily, "They want to talk to her."

"That's better. But her welfare comes first. They can wait a few days."

"They don't want to. They want to talk to her before Komarov gets here to sign the treaty."

"For God's sake, why?"

"I'm not sure."

"Look. It might be counterproductive to operate now. Some clots reduce on their own. You've got to monitor intracranial pressure and make

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your decision on the basis of the delta over time."

"That doesn't mean much to me."

"That's why you're a sheriff and I'm a neurosurgeon."

Durrell controlled himself with the visible effort of lighting a very smelly cigar. Ashes fell down his uniform front. "That's not all you are," he muttered around an unsteady flame.

"What's that? Speak up."

"I asked them outside to run a check on you. Some very interesting things came out."

"I was wondering how long your nasty little mind would take to get to that."

"You're probably full of diseases. Aren't bisexuals a high risk for AIDS?"

"You are a slimy chancre, Durrell. For your information, I am not a bisexual. We have the lowest HLTV risk of any group you care to name. Rather less, I should imagine, than fat southern sheriffs."

"Western. And I told you I wasn't a sheriff."

She leaned forward to read the star. Sure enough, it said: *Marshall, State of Nevada*. "How the hell did someone like you get in charge of this, anyway?"

"I found her. I pulled her out of the thing."

"So what?"

"So they're limiting access to her."

"Why? You heard Tony. She doesn't have anything that can infect us."

"But we can infect her," said Durrell.

"Ah," she said then. "Ah. Of course, you're right, we have no idea where she's from. That's why there are only three of us in here. You can think, anyway."

"Wasn't me; Liguri thought of that. You should have seen him. He slugged one of these button-down types who tried to horn in here. I had to rescue him."

"That must have been interesting."

"He's a feisty little shit. I like that. You're pretty feisty yourself."

"Keep it in your size-sixty pants, Durrell. I told you, you don't interest me one bit."

"I wasn't thinking of that!"

"Of course you weren't," she said. Leaning forward, she took the cigar from his hand and stubbed it out in the wet sink. "You might get some-

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thing nasty. And who in here would cure you?"

She left him standing by the urinals, his hands shaking with rage, and slammed the door as hard as the brake on it would let her.

"What's the intracranial?"

"Rising, Doctor."

Kendrick paused in midseal. "Fast?"

"No, but steadily, couple of points each hour."

"Pulse, respiration?"

"No change."

"Strange," she said to Liguri. The little doctor nodded, face focused. "Body temp?"

"Steady at eighty."

"Odd. We should see more vital-sign response. Well, we may have to go in after all." She felt her heart speed up as she said it.

"Another Valium, Olivia?"

"Thank you, dear, but not if I'm going to work." The ultraviolet cut off, and she turned to Liguri as they moved into isolation. "What kind of tool kit you got?"

"Yours. We sent a car to GW for it. It's next door."

"What's next door?"

"Complete OR."

"Sounds good," she said. "I wonder what they use this place for.... No, I don't want to know. We'll monitor for another hour, and prep if it's still increasing. Linda, you said you were OR-qualified?"

"Yes. But what will we do for an anesthesiologist?"

"Maybe I could help," said Liguri.

"Thanks, but I want a real one. We'll have to balance off the risk of contamination from another body."

"I'll tell them," said Durrell.

"You don't faint at the sight of blood, do you, Sheriff?"

"Haven't yet."

"Good. We can use you, too."

Two hours later she opened the door to the OR.

The dance was waiting for her, ready to begin. Deep in coma, head shaved and exposed, her patient was now only a green-shrouded mass

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centered in a gleaming, equipment-filled room. The only reminder of flesh was a motionless brown hand, thrown out as if in sleep, but strapped down, laced with tubing, slowly dripping blood. Light glowed on polished instruments. Even through the filter the air hit crowded with the smells of disinfectants, rubber, plasma.

Olivia Kendrick smiled slightly as she held up her hands for Linda to pull on the thin latex operating gloves. With the slight snap, all unfamiliarity and hesitation left her. She was the bullfighter entering the arena. On her was the pressure and responsibility for what was about to begin.

Neurosurgery is the most precise and exclusive medical speciality of all. Brain tissue is unimaginably delicate, and the structures involved are tiny. Once injured, it does not heal itself. A slip or error elsewhere in the body can usually be repaired, and the patient will live. In neurosurgery a false movement, an error, or even a slowness in procedure will result in death or in irreversible coma — brain death.

The neurosurgeon grows used to operating under pressure. Manual skill and decades of learning and experience must be backed by self-control, coolness, and the ability to make irrevocable decisions in seconds. He —or she — does it alone. Here, in the world of humming light and low voices and the steady pulse of respirators and monitors, Olivia Kendrick lived most intensely, focusing all her experience and courage and skill on six square inches of exposed skull. The deadly dance was ready to begin.

It was 8:20 A.M.

"Very good," she said, moving forward. "Today's procedure will begin with a craniotomy."

Freed had removed the dressing and prepped the area. Now Kendrick, drawing the scalpel with quick sureness, sliced out a flap of skin and pinned it back.

"Saw."

"The bone saw whined out a mist that hung in the motionless air. Below Olivia, leaning close, a bloody three-inch-diameter hole gradually opened under the brilliant light.

"Skull."

The chunk of bone slipped with a splash into a bowl of saline.

Now she probed and cut downward, inward, through the tough dura that protected the brain, soft as jelly. She retracted it gently. Gross structures looked normal, but, aside from her own sense of anatomical analogy,

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she had no chorography, no way of knowing what she was entering. She hated to do this. Too much removed in a certain area, and the greatest mathematician in the world would never add two and two again.

She did not need to bolt fear from her mind; her consciousness was in her fingers now, working their way down and inward. Why the hell was it so deep! Most trauma clots occurred next to the skull. The lights hummed. She felt moisture, and automatically turned her head so the nurse could wipe her forehead; then recollected the plastic sheath around her. She blinked sweat from her eyes and bent close again: 8:55.

Infarctions — necrotic areas from ruptured or blocked blood vessels —are tricky in the brain. Elsewhere in the body a surgeon can depend on the heart-lung machine to maintain life while circulation is stopped through vessels he cuts or clamps off as he works.

You couldn't do that in the brain. Stop its circulation for three minutes, and there is no point in continuing the procedure. Yet there were a few techniques she could use to give herself time. On a stand above the patient, already wired into her bloodstream, dangled a foil-wrapped bottle. At a word the anesthesiologist would begin the drip. Nitroprusside dilates the vessels in the abdomen; the blood quickly pools there, and pressure would ease the tension on thin-walled arteries while her instruments probed around them.

Her fingers were far within the skull now. Except for the occasional murmur of the anesthesiologist, or her requests for an instrument or sponge, no one spoke. Except to hand her what she needed, no one moved. The only sounds were the slurp of the suction, a cheerful sound like a child finishing a soda; the respirator hissing on and off; the cardiac monitor's steady, mindless beep.

"Patient seems to be doing well," said the anesthesiologist.

"Good," said Kendrick absently.

It was 9:20.

At 9:55 she could see the clot. A brownish mass, it lay in a tangle of nerves and blood vessels. Within half an inch of it was a white cord that she recognized, with the relief and orientation of a ship captain spotting a familiar buoy in fog, as the right optic nerve. There were stouter cords, cerebral arteries, and, eyeing them distrustfully, Olivia removed her hands from the hole and tried to stretch off the knot someone had tied in the muscles of her upper back.

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# At that instant she knew she had made a basic and dreadful error. "Surface!" she snapped.

"Let's see that scan again, number three."

Durrell, clumsy in OR dress, brought it over. He held it up for her to see. "Higher," she ordered, noting absently that he was pale and sweating.

It was time to do it. "Take her down," she said to the anesthesiologist.

The nitroprusside drip began.

"Pressure dropping — pressure down."

"That was fast." She probed again. "Small sucker to my right. Gimme the hose. . . . Reading?"

"Only fifty."

"Damn, she's deep. . . . O.K., going micro now."

She stepped back to let Freed swing the big stand-mounted operating microscope into place. Kendrick would approach the damaged area at twenty magnifications. Speed was important now. A patient could take only minutes of reduced oxygen. Yet caution was even more vital. A wrong move here would mean the worst.

Peering through the eyepieces, she used a tiny probe to search around the edges of the clot. Damn it, she thought, where's the artery? It came into view then, and she levered the clot gently up. There was no new blood under it. Good. She could find the tear and suture it. . . .

There was no tear.

At that instant she knew she had made a basic and dreadful error. She released the artery instantly. "Surface!" she snapped. "Bring her up, quick!"

"Now?"

"Now, damn it."

"What's going on? Did you screw up?" asked Durrell.

"Shut up," she said, and added another epithet that made the sheriff start. He hasn't heard that one out West, she thought.

"What happened?" said Liguri.

"We were all wrong," she said tightly. "I should have seen it — the hypothermia, the light coma, increased neurochemical activity *right in the area of the trauma*—"

"What do you mean?"

"This brain is healing."

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"They don't do that, Dr. Kendrick," said the anesthesiologist reasonably.

She snatched up the film in a bloody hand, shook it at them. "This one does! It's all autonomic. When the brain's damaged, the body shuts down, drops temperature, and feeds repair chemicals to the scene. Left alone, the organism fixes itself, like our bodies when we get a wound elsewhere. But more elegantly! This is a better-designed piece of machinery."

"Told you so," giggled Liguri.

"Yeah, but you said subcellular.... Well, I guess this is ... it's terrific! If we learn how she does that, I'd be out of a goddamn job, except for tumors ... and I bet she'd lick those, too." Kendrick stared into the bloody hole, lost in wonder, then suddenly recollected herself. "O.K., I guess as long as I'm in here, I'll snip out the clot, speed things up. Then we'll close. Another week, and she should be awake. Another hour, and we'll be eating sandwiches."

"Not me," said Durrell. She saw that he had, very quietly, lost his breakfast down the front of his uniform under the suit.

Two days later, late at night.

Kendrick sat by the bed. She was alone. Liguri had gone home to sleep; Durrell to his room down the hall. The nurse, too, was in a cot next door. The isolation ward was silent, with only the occasional thunder of a jet approaching National over the Potomac to remind her an outside world existed at all.

Olivia was not thinking. Not remembering. Her mind was empty at last after hours of thought, of memory, and of regret. Without direction, her eyes traced the sleeping curve of cheek, the cup curve of eyelash. They reminded her, in a way, of another cheek, of another high-boned brow. But only reminded, perhaps less by their vague likeness than by her own silent perusal. Though the thought, the stray reminiscence that comes sometimes in the slow night, had been triggered somehow by them in the mysterious threading of microcurrent among synapses like the stir of schools along the deep sea bottom. No, she thought consciously now, they were not the same. They were not *hers*—

One of them flickered, and she caught her breath.

The eyes opened. She leaned breathing-close, examining the dilated pupils: left, right. She was nodding, satisfied, when they turned slowly to lock into hers.

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"Hello," Kendrick said, and grinned.

"Hello."

That, she had not expected. "Oh, you can talk? That's great. How do you feel?"

"*Horosho*'. . . . I mean — disoriented, I —"

"You're still weak. But you'll be O.K. Wow! You sure recover fast."

"You're a . . . doctor?" The lips explored words as if forming them for the first time.

"That's right. And who are you?"

The woman frowned. Then she frowned some more. Olivia noted the way the skin folded at mouth and eye without wrinkling, as if this were the first expression that had crossed this face. "Who? I'm not sure. . . . I don't seem to remember much. But you look so *strange*. . . ?"

"Don't worry about it. Standard postoperative amnesia. It'll pass in a day or so." She felt guilty; the clot removal had probably speeded recovery, but the unavoidable trauma of surgery would delay it; on balance, this patient would have done as well untouched. But all in all, I didn't do that badly, Olivia thought. At least she can talk. I wasn't too sure, going in past Broca's area like that.

"No, wait," the woman said then. "I remember. Who I am."

"You do? I guess that shouldn't surprise me. Not now. What's your name?"

"Oh — that." She smiled slowly, for the first time, and in Olivia Kendrick a once-familiar feeling stirred. "Give me one."

"What?"

"I don't have a name here yet. You give me one. That's easy, isn't it?"

"Easy . . . maybe."

"What is your favorite name? No, wait. I know. It is Celeste."

"*What?*"

"You were thinking it just now. Before I opened my eyes." The eyes were steady from the pillow. Odd, Olivia thought through the shock, I can't tell what shade they are.

"You can — ?"

"Oh, only sometimes, when it is easy. And just then it was. Very. Who was she?"

Dr. Kendrick took a deep breath. She started to speak, then shook her head wordlessly. Her hand sought her left chest.

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Celeste raised a plastic-shrouded finger, then pushed the shroud off. Her hand touched Olivia's suit.

"You don't need that."

Olivia could not speak.

The finger remained, increased its pressure. It traced down the invisible line of the sutures, white stretch marks as if a baby had been torn from her chest. Olivia shuddered, her eyes closed. She did not wonder now how she knew.

"You are damaged."

The angina ebbed, and Kendrick opened her eyes. I need a Valium, she thought. She managed a strangled, "Yes."

"We could help that."

"Don't worry about it. Just rest. There's plenty of time."

She went into the OR, and with shaking hands turned the key in the cabinet of drugs.

Lying awake that night in the room off the ward, steadied but not yet soothed to sleep, Olivia lay listening to Freed's regular breathing, and thought.

What kind of thing, person, was in the room next to hers?

She had healed herself of a massive concussion. She had guessed, incredibly, about Celeste. No. It had not been a guess. Olivia had to accept that, too, incredible as it would have been to her three days before.

She had custody of someone . . . unimaginable. Normal enough in appearance, from the outside. But only from the outside.

And, she thought cynically, You're falling for her, Livy.

Her thoughts were interrupted by voices from the next room. Voices? But everyone cleared for isolation was asleep. She threw back the covers and pulled on an operating smock. At the door she paused.

There was a strange man in the ward.

He was in a bacteriological dress-out, and he was sitting beside Celeste's bed. Kendrick flipped on the light with a sudden, angry motion. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing sneaking in here?"

The masked figure turned to her. Behind the facepiece she saw a thin face, the red plastic-rimmed glasses the trendy technocrats of Washington had adopted almost as a badge. Yes, beneath the suit he wore a tie and sharkskin.

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"Dr. Kendrick. I didn't think you were up."

"I asked you who you were!"

"I'm Jack Racker, in charge of the case."

"What case?"

"This case. Sit down, please. I was just asking Miss X here some preliminary questions."

"Her name is Celeste. You're not in charge of her 'case,' Mr. Racker; I am. She's in post-op. You'll have to leave."

"I'm afraid not. You see, I'm the OIC here — the officer in charge."

He said it quietly, but she felt the force behind it. More than the fat marshal could muster. She started to reply, then bit it off and crossed to kneel by the bed. "Babe, are you all right? Has he disturbed you?"

"No . . . not yet."

"What kind of questions do you want to ask? She's still weak."

"Come on, Doctor." Racker waved at a corner of the room. Kendrick turned; she saw a small TV monitor there. Obviously had always been, but she had not noticed it. She turned back to him, furious, but he was continuing in that quiet voice. "I appreciate your care for her; it's been flawless. But we know her condition as well as you do. We saw her walking this evening. If she can walk, she's well enough for a short . . . interview. And we have plenty of questions, about the craft she was on, her two companions, and what she's doing here."

Olivia glanced at Celeste. "Look . . . let's talk somewhere else."

"Suits me."

When they were in the air lock, out of earshot, he turned to her. "Now. What is this, Doctor? I don't appreciate being obstructed."

"I don't mean to be obtuse, Mr. Racker. I simply think we should postpone anything likely to upset her."

"We can't much longer, Doctor."

"Oh? What will you do, throw me out bodily?"

"I hardly think that would be called for, Doctor."

In the face of that assurance, Olivia knew then that anything she said would be bluster. Better to temporize, save what influence she had. "Look, she needs rest more than anything else. This is her sleeping period. Can't you conduct your interview later?"

"Tomorrow. Early. No later."

"Oh yes, early as you like. . . . We wake her about eight. Come back

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then, and I'll stay here while you talk with her."

Racker looked at the air lock entrance, then back at Kendrick; at last he checked his watch. "Very well, I suppose we can wait a few more hours. It may be best if she's alert."

"Yes, it would."

He took a step toward the lock, then turned. "By the way, I see you're not wearing your isolation suit."

"Not anymore. She's not going to catch anything from us she can't handle."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

"And us? Are we safe from her?"

"Yes."

"I hope so. But I'm going to keep you all isolated till the questions are over . . . till they're answered. Good night, Dr. Kendrick."

"Good night."

When she went back, feeling vaguely ill from aborted sleep, Celeste was sitting up. "Olivia . . . ?"

"He's gone."

"But he'll be back."

"That's right."

"When?"

"In the morning."

"You have to help me leave," she said then.

Olivia rolled her eyes and laughed. "That's impossible. You have no idea where you are, dear."

"I know where I am. He was thinking about it. And it's not impossible. We can leave here, and we will."

Kendrick eyed her. She looked serious, but so young. "All right, so you may know. But I won't help you. You should stay here for now."

"Will it change your mind if I tell you why?"

"I doubt it."

"This will not surprise you," said the woman. She levered herself out of bed. Kendrick moved forward to help, but Celeste motioned her back and took a step. Another. She walked to the wall and back. Slowly, but without the sway and disorientation of a recent cerebral operand, or even the

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weakness that trauma and bed rest induce.

"You've recovered quickly."

"I think you know why."

"Because you're . . . I think I do, yes."

"Now listen." Celeste glanced at the monitor. "Can they see us in the other room? Where you sleep?"

"No . . . I don't think so."

"Where else can we go?"

"In the bathroom."

In the bathroom they stood together before the mirror. Kendrick looked at the smooth face looking at itself.

"Now listen. You know that a war is imminent."

Olivia smiled. "Hold on, now. I'll get a sedative for you."

"Listen! Don't treat me like a hysteric. I'm not."

"But to talk about war! There's tension. Always that. But the premier is scheduled to come here next week."

"He won't. We monitor their sites as well. And we do more. There are more than one of me — of people who look like you."

Olivia said slowly, "I'm having trouble believing this."

"I can feel it. But it's still true. Komarov has decided they must strike now, before your ballistic missile defense is operational. They are frightened and are about to decide it. We believe they will choose a strike. Your military suspect it, too. They also know that once mobilization begins, there will be no way of pulling back from war. That is why there is no news about it. It is that close to happening."

"If I believe you — what then?"

"Then you must help me escape."

"Why?"

"I was carrying that news."

"I can't believe you couldn't have communicated it some other way."

"How? We can travel quickly, we can evade radar when we wish, but we still must use radio for short-distance communication. And if we did, it would be detected immediately. I have to make my report, so that we can try to stop the strike."

"How would you know all this?"

"I was at the Politburo meeting."

Hearing this from any other patient, at any other point in her career, Ken-

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drick would have reached then for the Thorazine. Bed rest and a thorough psychological workup. But then — she bent and ran cold water, splashed her face, and sighed. She had seen the PETTS. Compared to those impossibilities, what Celeste was telling her now was easy to believe.

"Look — I've got no sympathy for the bozos who run this place. I'd like to see you out of here even if you were, well, just anyone. But I see no way of leaving."

"You see no way. Does that mean there is none?"

"Yes."

"Wrong, Olivia," said Celeste. She smiled slowly, and for the first time in her life, Kendrick felt the chill of facing an intellectual superior. "Listen now. Is there a telephone here? To the outside?"

"Yes, but it'll be tapped."

"That doesn't matter. In fact, it helps."

"I don't think —"

"You don't need to, Olivia." And she felt the soft hand on her cheek, caressing it. She shuddered, closing her eyes, and, as if from a distance, she heard the soft, unaccented voice, an accent she knew now was just like her own, go on: "You don't. All you need to do is what I say."

THE GURNEY'S wheels hummed swiftly along the corridor outside the lock. A guard jumped up from a chair, and a *Times* whispered to the spotless tiles. "Hey! You two. Hold it right there!"

"Emergency." Dr. Kendrick nodded briefly at the sheeted lump on the stretcher. "We need your help, Officer. We've got to get to ground level. I've already called the ambulance."

"But — you can't leave here, Doctor!"

"Do you know who this is?"

The guard eyed her suspiciously, one hand on the butt of his gun. He suddenly reached out and threw back the sheet.

"Marshal Durrell!"

"Yes." Kendrick lifted his eyelid with a thumb. "He's had a massive coronary. I'm a neurosurgeon; I can't deal with it. I've stabilized him, but we need to get him to a full ICU right away."

The man hesitated for just a moment more, then turned and flicked a switch on the wall. Behind them came the slam of automatic doors. "Sealing

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up," he said. "Keep our — defector — in there till I can call Dr. Liguri and my relief. Come on, the elevator's down the hall."

Behind the running guard, she eyed the nurse. The uncolorable eyes looked back at her from above the surgical mask.

"How long will he stay down, Doctor?"

"An hour. I didn't give him much."

"Will there really be an ambulance?"

"There'd better be."

There was. Twenty minutes later they wheeled Durrell into the emergency room entrance on Washington Circle. They pushed the gurney rapidly around two corners and exited onto 23rd Street to Kendrick's Mercedes, still in underground parking where she had left it to go running. Engaged in the usual nightime chaos of knife and gunshot wounds, marital traumas, car accidents, none of the ER staff had bothered to stop her. She doubted they would even remember she'd been there. Following her directions without question now, Olivia swung onto the Beltway. They propped the unconscious marshal in a phone booth in a closed Chevron station on Route 50, as if they had headed east toward Annapolis or Baltimore, then swung back on 495 and took the Richmond exit south. Though it was 2:00 A.M., there were still hundreds of cars on the Beltway, dozens of exits; they were safe. They were more than that. They had vanished, submerged in 230 million people. And no one could know whether they were in Spokane or Key West, Wilmington or Chicago. They had faded like a submarine on alert into a million miles of ocean.

*If she is the dream, then who is the dreamer? If she is the pearl, from what inalienable internal torture does she rise?*

*Everything human is mortal. Not only foreordained to death but imperfect in essence. No gods descend to bless us. Deep within, we know: our loves are like ourselves. Transcendence we attribute and worship. But we know it is not there. We know it illusion, know it reified only by our intoxication with the beloved. Would we have it otherwise? If it were in our grasp, not hovering butterfly of fantasy but smooth steel more solid than our transient flesh — could we truly love it then?*

*Or would we hate?*

Twelve minutes and five seconds, and already her lungs felt like rocks.

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God, I'm out of shape, Kendrick thought, pausing jogging in place at the corner to wait for the light. Then it changed, and she ran on, passing the quiet, shabby old houses, the old maples, following the rusty trolley tracks down toward the riverfront.

Running, her mind turned back as it often did, to plans, upcoming symposia, challenging cases in the ward; and then halted, confused.

For her, since the night of the escape, nothing predictable, plannable, controllable lay ahead.

Several days had passed since that nighttime hegira, and they were still safe. So lost and anonymous in the heart of America, she had no compunction about going running in full daylight. Besides, she really needed the exercise.

Instead, she thought about the house. A huge white-painted three-story, paint crackling like dead skin, in a backwater neighborhood south of the center of town. Small, stunted yard with a pear tree. Rusting car out front that she had not yet seen driven. Dusty windows; cracked, paint-hungry porch. A huge, peeling dump of a house no one but a slumlord would have looked at twice.

Inside it were sixteen of them.

They looked like normal people, but they did not talk. Not to each other at all, that she could see. And most of them not to her. Celeste did. The others did occasionally, when she asked them innocuous questions such as why there was nothing in the kitchen. (She'd sent out for pizza three times, another reason she needed to run.) Nor did they seem to sleep. They just worked.

On what, she was unable to discover. It was in the attic. They went up and down continually, or stood around the dining room table studying diagrams. And that was how the crisis had come. This morning it had been a map of the United States, with four cities marked in blue. She had stood by the table with them and silently looked at it; and one of them. Eric, a blond man who seemed at times to lead them, looked up from it and saw her expression. He had turned to Celeste, and though Olivia had heard nothing, she almost, she thought, almost understood what he had said.

She knew then suddenly how a dog must feel as it listens to a human conversation.

Celeste came round the table to her. "Olivia. Are you feeling all right?"

"I think so. Babe, can we talk?"

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Celeste had glanced around at the others, nodded, and led the way out to the porch. Olivia had picked up a Heineken on the way, absently noting the twelve-pack was almost empty. They sat in the rusty iron swing with its grimy green cushions. She cracked the bottle, and they sat and swung. Across the street the neighborhood boys were hanging around an old Volvo with the hood open.

"I don't understand what's going on," said Olivia at last.

"But I told you."

"You told me you were planning to — change us."

"That's right."

"But — how? I don't see how. I mean, everyone is very busy, but there's nothing—"

"Huge? No spaceships looming overhead?"

"Is it silly? But I guess that's what I mean."

"Let me try to explain. You're a doctor. You might understand. We are going to change the DNA."

"How?"

"We have prepared a culture. It's rather like your bacteriological warfare. In a few days, when things are ready, we will release it into the atmosphere. It's wind-borne at first, then spreads from person to person like influenza. Though it replicates like a virus, it will be subtler. It will penetrate each cell, but instead of killing, it will change it. There will not be much gross reforming in adults. They are grown, completed. In children it will be different. And in time, in a generation, all human beings will be as I am. Your scientists will see it as a beneficent mutation — if they understand it at all."

Olivia sat silent. At last she laughed weakly. "At least I haven't seen any pods."

"Excuse me?"

"A joke. I'm sorry — a bad one. It's so radical. It's eugenics on a grand scale. But — couldn't you have told us about it, asked if we wanted improving? We are imperfect, but some of those imperfections, from your point of view, we treasure. Changing our whole race, without our even knowing—"

"Would you have consented?"

"I guess not."

"Don't you think you need to change? We think we can avert war. This

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time. But you can see you're headed for destruction as you are now. If not by nuclear war, then you will destroy your ozone layer, melt your ice caps, trash your planet around you. Think of what we bring! No more dwarfs like your friend Liguri. No more emotional cripples like Celeste. And not only physical improvement. It's not even just increased intelligence. You need to be less aggressive, more willing to cooperate and, if necessary, give in. Why do you think we watched, planned? We are like a doctor who arrives at the last stage of an illness."

"I know. We all know that, deep down. But still. . . ."

"You're frightened, Olivia. I haven't felt that from you before."

"I guess I am. Babe, I have to get out of here."

After a long count, Celeste said carefully, glancing toward the interior of the house, "You mean you want to leave?"

"Oh, not that. I mean, I just need to get out of the house — go downtown, shop, maybe run. That's it, I need to run." She looked down at the open beer. "Would that be all right with you?"

Again the pause. She wondered then, How far can they communicate like that? Then Celeste said with a little laugh, "Of course, dear. Who would say you couldn't go out? You can run whenever you like. You're not a prisoner, you know."

And Kendrick had laughed, too. Because she had not been sure of that. Not sure at all.

Now, turning the corner to head back, she lifted her eyes for a moment to the river. It sparkled brilliant and distant, and for a moment she missed the Potomac. She knew even as she missed it that she was missing not it but everything else she had left behind.

Still jogging slowly, she lifted her hand to her eyes. Not surgeon's fingers, one of her professors had once said, only half in jest. Too short. But she had proved him wrong. Proven them all wrong, till the most reactionary, religious president in history had chosen her as his personal surgeon. What would her skill be worth now? Nothing.

Get a grip, Olivia, she thought. In this brave new world, neurosurgeons will not be needed. Was that to be regretted? She thought not.

The house came into view ahead, and she slowed still further. She believed. But something in her heart, or her fingers, was not wholly convinced.

* * *

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A few days later, late in the afternoon, two young men came to the house. They wore gray trousers and white short sleeves and leaned their bicycles carefully against the pear tree. They stood waiting on the porch, smiling, after they had knocked. Olivia had been sitting in the parlor with a glass of gin, wondering absently who had owned the house before. Their taste in furniture was awful. She saw Eric open the door and stand there, waiting.

"Mr. Geoffrey? We wonder if we might speak to you for a moment."

Olivia, watching from the side, saw tension enter the blond man's stance. After a moment he nodded.

"Sir, I understand there are several people living here together."

Eric said, "Yes, go on."

"If we might ask — are you a religious group?"

"No."

"A commune?"

After a moment he said, "Yes, that's it."

"That's very interesting. The early Christians lived like that, you know."

"I'd heard that," said Eric.

"Have you heard that all humanity begins life in sin? Have you been saved, sir?"

Without answering, he took out his wallet. The taller boy stared at the bill, then lifted his head defiantly. "Thanks. But we don't want that, sir. We want to help you."

"You don't know anything about me," said Eric. "Take it. Now. And get off our property."

That night she asked Celeste to sit with her on the porch. They swung in the creaking old settee for a long time before she said at last, "Celeste — I'm frightened."

"Still, Livy? I don't know how to reassure you. I thought letting you go out — running — would make you feel better. You can leave whenever you want to run. We trust you."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you trust me? I don't see any other human beings with you. Why me?"

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"Because you love me," said Celeste simply. "I can feel it."

They sat on the swing in the darkness for a while. Olivia could not trust herself to speak. At last, silently, she put out her hand. And a long time later, as silently, she felt it taken.

She turned in the creaking swing, fearful as she had never been before at this moment of recognition, of final intimacy, and felt the lips beneath hers. They were warm and soft, but not as the real Celeste's had been, not tremulous or doubting or equivocal. They were controlled; they parted, but she felt behind them neither welcome nor rejection. It was as if they experienced, felt, but did not judge or decide either for or against. Her hand felt the softness of the flesh beneath cloth, softnesses she had palpated as a physician and felt nothing, but which now filled her with trembling desire. Yet she still could not tell whether she was welcome or not. At last she sat back, grateful for the darkness, and said, hearing the huskiness and fear in her voice, "What do your people know about love?"

"We know human beings quite well, Olivia."

"I hope so. To do what you plan, you should know us better than we know ourselves. Or you can do great harm."

"You must trust me," said Celeste distantly.

"You said you knew that I loved you. Do you think you could — love me?"

"Ah," came the accentless voice in the warm dark. "You mean individually, you and — in the way you mean?"

"In the way I mean."

"Unfortunately," said Celeste slowly, "Olivia, that is one of the things we are going to change."

She sat, her arm still around the other, the double, the doppelgänger; around someone human in form, or superhuman. She sat in the schizophrenia that precedes crying or rage, or the final breakdown, the final disconnection. She sat, and in the street faintly to her came the sound of curses.

She stood in a dark phone booth in a darkened bar. Behind her the jukebox whined about love and loss, and men's voices sniggered at a fumble on the tube. Two of them had called to her on her way to the back. She hated them. The telephone purred distantly in her ear. At the third ring, someone picked it up. "Four three nine seven," a guarded male voice said.

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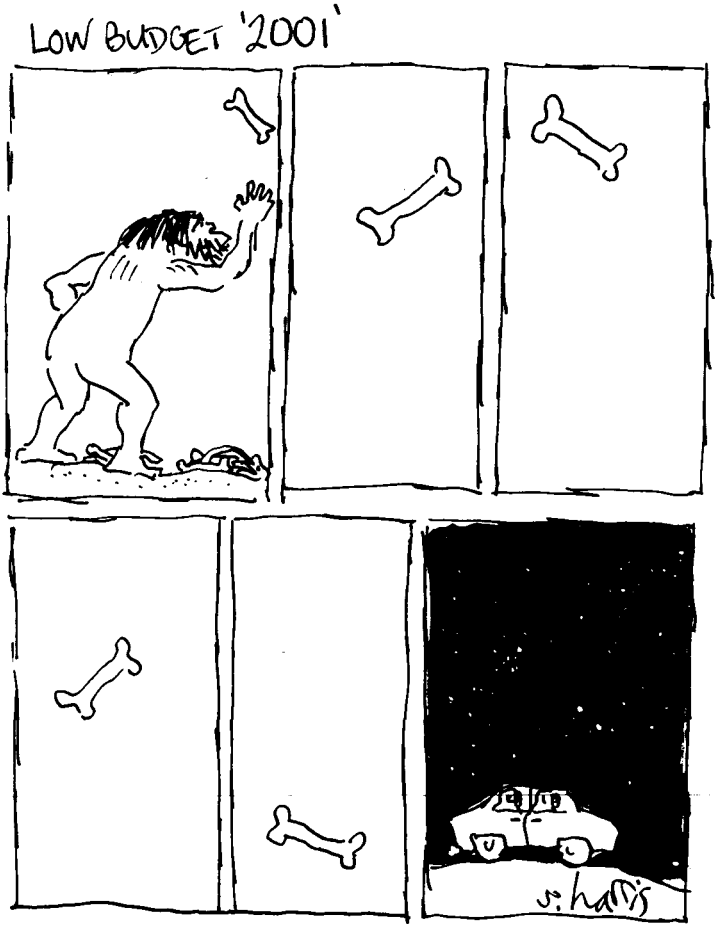
"Mr. Racker, please."

"He's not here. This is Durrell. Kendrick? We been hopin' you'd call. Where are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I have something important to tell you."

And the distant voice changed, became heavy in its maleness, its smug triumph. It said, "Oh, you finally decided, did ya? The recorder is on. Go ahead, Olivia. And welcome — to our side."

Full of hatred, she began to speak.

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*Today many feel that corporations control the country. In "Out of Copyright," Charles Sheffield ("Obsolete Skill," December 1987) shows a future in which corporate control has reached new levels, in which the company to win a contract is the one with the best and the brightest thinkers . . .*

# Out of Copyright

**By Charles Sheffield**

TROUBLESHOOTING. A SPLENDID idea, and one that I agree with totally in principle. Bang! One bullet, and trouble bites the dust. But unfortunately, trouble doesn't know the rules. Trouble won't stay dead.

I looked around the table. My top troubleshooting team was here. I was here. Unfortunately, they were supposed to be headed for Jupiter, and I ought to be down on Earth. In less than twenty-four hours, the draft pick would begin. That wouldn't wait, and if I didn't leave in the next thirty minutes, I would never make it in time. I needed to be in two places at once. I cursed the copyright laws and the single-copy restriction, and went to work.

"You've read the new requirement," I said. "You know the parameters. Ideas, anyone?"

A dead silence. They were facing the problem in their own unique ways. Wolfgang Pauli looked half-asleep, Thomas Edison was drawing little doll-figures on the table's surface, Enrico Fermi seemed to be counting

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on his fingers, and John von Neumann was staring impatiently at the other three. I was doing none of those things. I knew very well that wherever the solution would come from, it would not be from inside my head. My job was much more straightforward: I had to see that when we had a possible answer, it *happened.* And I had to see that we got *one* answer, not four.

The silence in the room went on and on. My brain trust was saying nothing, while I watched the digits on my watch flicker by. I had to stay and find a solution; and I had to get to the draft picks. But most of all and hardest of all, I had to remain quiet, to let my team do some thinking.

It was small consolation to know that similar meetings were being held within the offices of the other three combines. Everyone must be finding it equally hard going. I knew the players, and I could imagine the scenes, even though all the troubleshooting teams were different. NETSCO had a group that was intellectually the equal of ours at Romberg AG: Niels Bohr, Theodore von Karman, Norbert Weiner, and Marie Curie. MMG, the great Euro-Mexican combine of Magrit-Marcus Gesellschaft, had focused on engineering power rather than pure scientific understanding and creativity, and, in addition to the Soviet rocket designer Sergey Korolev and the American Nikola Tesla, they had reached farther back (and with more risk) to the great nineteenth-century English engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel. He had been one of the outstanding successes of the program; I wished he were working with me, but MMG had always refused to look at a trade. MMG's one bow to theory was a strange one, the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, but the unlikely quartet made one hell of a team.

And finally there was BP Megation, whom I thought of as confused. At any rate, I didn't understand their selection logic. They had used billions of dollars to acquire a strangely mixed team: Erwin Schrödinger, David Hilbert, Leo Szilard, and Henry Ford. They were all great talents, and all famous names in their fields, but I wondered how well they could work as a unit.

All the troubleshooting teams were now pondering the same emergency. Our problem was created when the Pan-National Union suddenly announced a change to the Phase B demonstration program. They wanted to modify impact conditions, as their contracts with us permitted them to do. They didn't have to tell us how to do it, either, which was just as well

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for them, since I was sure they didn't know. How do you take a billion tons of mass, already launched to reach a specific target at a certain point of time, and redirect it to a different end point with a different arrival time?

There was no point in asking them *why* they wanted to change rendezvous conditions. It was their option. Some of our management saw the action on PNU's part as simple bloody-mindedness, but I couldn't agree. The four multinational combines had each been given contracts to perform the biggest space engineering exercise in human history: small asteroids (only a kilometer or so across — but massing a billion tons each) had to be picked up from their natural orbits and redirected to the Jovian system, where they were to make precise rendezvous with assigned locations of the moon Io. Each combine had to select the asteroid and the method of moving it, but deliver within a tight transfer-energy budget and a tight time schedule.

For that task the PNU would pay each group a total of $8 billion. That sounds like a fair amount of money, but I knew our accounting figures. To date, with the project still not finished (rendezvous would be in eight more days), Romberg AG had spent $14.5 billion. We were looking at a probable cost overrun by a factor of two. I was willing to bet that the other three groups were eating very similar losses.

Why?

Because this was only Phase B of a four-phase project. Phase A had been a system design study, which led to four Phase B awards for a demonstration project. The Phase B effort that the four combines were working on now was a proof-of-capability run for the full Europan Metamorphosis. The real money came in the future, in Phases C and D. Those would be awarded by the PNU to a single combine, and the award would be based largely on Phase B performance. The next phases called for the delivery of fifty asteroids to impact points on Europa (Phase C), followed by thermal mixing operations on the moon's surface (Phase D). The contract value of C and D would be somewhere up around $800 billion. That was the fish that all the combines were after, and it was the reason we would all overspend lavishly on this phase.

By the end of the whole program, Europa would have a forty-kilometer-deep water ocean over all its surface. And then the real fun would begin. Some contractor would begin the installation of the fusion plants, and

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the seeding of the sea-farms with the first prokaryotic bacterial forms.

The stakes were high; and to keep everybody on their toes, PNU did the right thing. They kept throwing in these little zingers, to mimic the thousand and one things that would go wrong in the final project phases.

While I was sitting and fidgeting, my team had gradually come to life. Fermi was pacing up and down the room — always a good sign; and Wolfgang Pauli was jabbing impatiently at the keys of a computer console. John von Neumann hadn't moved, but since he did everything in his head anyway, that didn't mean much.

I looked again at my watch. I had to go. "Ideas?" I said again.

Von Neumann made a swift chopping gesture of his hand. "We have to make a choice, Al. It can be done in four or five ways."

The others were nodding. "The problem is only one of efficiency and speed," added Fermi. "I can give you an order-of-magnitude estimate of the effects on the overall program within half an hour."

"Within fifteen minutes." Pauli raised the bidding.

"No need to compete this one." They were going to settle down to a real four-way fight on methods — they always did — but I didn't have the time to sit here and referee. The important point was that they said it could be done. "You don't have to rush it. Whatever you decide, it will have to wait until I get back." I stood up. "Tom?"

Edison shrugged. "How long will you be gone, Al?"

"Two days, maximum. I'll head back right after the draft picks." (That wasn't quite true; when the draft picks were over, I had some other business to attend to that did not include the troubleshooters; but two days should cover everything.)

"Have fun." Edison waved his hand casually. "By the time you get back, I'll have the engineering drawings for you."

One thing about working with a team like mine — they may not always be right, but they sure are always cocky.

"Make room there. Move over!" The guards were pushing ahead to create a narrow corridor through the wedged mass of people. The one in front of me was butting with his helmeted head, not even looking to see whom he was shoving aside. "Move!" he shouted. "Come on now, out of the way."

We were in a hurry. Things had been frantically busy Topside before

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I left, so I had cut it fine on connections to begin with, then been held up half an hour at reentry. We had broken the speed limits on the atmospheric segment, and there would be PNU fines for that, but still we hadn't managed to make up all the time. Now the first draft pick was only seconds away, and I was supposed to be taking part in it.

A thin woman in a green coat clutched at my arm as we bogged down for a moment in the crush of people. Her face was gray and grim, and she had a placard hanging round her neck. "You could wait longer for the copyright!" She had to shout to make herself heard. "It would cost you nothing — and look at the misery you would prevent. What you're doing is immoral! TEN MORE YEARS!"

Her last words were a scream as she called out this year's slogan. TEN MORE YEARS! I shook my arm free as the guard in front of me made sudden headway, and dashed along in his wake. I had nothing to say to the woman; nothing that she would listen to. If it were immoral, what did ten more years have to do with it? Ten more years; if by some miracle they were granted ten more years on the copyrights, what then? I knew the answer. They would try to talk the Pan-National Union into fifteen more years, or perhaps twenty. When you pay somebody off, it only increases their demands. I know, only too well. They are never satisfied with what they get.

Joe Delacorte and I scurried into the main chamber and shuffled sideways to our seats at the last possible moment. All the preliminary nonsense was finished, and the real business was beginning. The tension in the room was terrific. To be honest, a lot of it was being generated by the media. They were all poised to make maximum noise as they shot the selection information all over the System. If it were not for the media, I don't think the PNU would hold live draft picks at all. We'd all hook in with video links and do our business the civilized way.

The excitement now was bogus for other reasons, too. The professionals — I and a few others — would not become interested until the ten rounds were complete. Before that, the choices were just too limited. Only when they were all made, and the video teams were gone, would the four groups get together off-camera and begin the horse trading. *"My ninth round plus my fifth for your second." "Maybe, if you'll throw in $10 million and a tenth-round draft pick for next year. . . ."*

Meanwhile, BP Megation had taken the microphone. "First selection,"

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said their representative. "Robert Oppenheimer."

I looked at Joe, and he shrugged. No surprise. Oppenheimer was the perfect choice — a brilliant scientist, but also practical, and willing to work with other people. He had died in 1967, so his original copyright had expired within the past twelve months. I knew his family had appealed for a copyright extension and been refused. Now BP Megation had sole single-copy rights for another lifetime.

"Trade?" whispered Joe.

I shook my head. We would have to beggar ourselves for next year's draft picks to make BP give up Oppenheimer. Other combine reps had apparently made the same decision. There was the clicking of data entry as the people around me updated portable databases. I did the same thing with a stub of pencil and a folded sheet of yellow paper, putting a check mark alongside his name. Oppenheimer was taken care of; I could forget that one. If by some miracle one of the four teams had overlooked some other top choice, I had to be ready to make an instant revision to my own selections.

"First selection, by NETSCO," said another voice. "Peter Joseph William Debye."

It was another natural choice. Debye had been a Nobel prizewinner in physics, a theoretician with an excellent grasp of applied technology. He had died in 1966. Nobel laureates in science, particularly ones with that practical streak, went fast. As soon as their copyrights expired, they would be picked up in the draft the same year.

That doesn't mean it always works out well. The most famous case, of course, was Albert Einstein. When his copyright had expired in 2030, BP Megation had had first choice in the draft pick. They had their doubts, and they must have sweated blood over their decision. The rumor mill said they spent over $70 million in simulations alone, before they decided to take him as their top choice. The same rumor mill said that the cloned form was now showing amazing ability in chess and music, but no interest at all in physics or mathematics. If that was true, BP Megation had dropped $2 billion down a black hole: $1 billion straight to the PNU for acquisition of copyright, and another $1 billion for the clone process. Theorists were always tricky; you could never tell how they would turn out.

Magrit-Marcus Gesellschaft had now made their first draft pick, and

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chosen another Nobel laureate, John Cockroft. He also had died in 1967. So far, every selection was completely predictable. The three combines were picking the famous scientists and engineers who had died in 1966 and 1967, and who were now, with the expiration of family retention of copyrights, available for cloning for the first time.

The combines were being logical, but it made for a very dull draft pick. Maybe it was time to change that. I stood up to announce our own first take.

"First selection, by Romberg AG," I said. "Charles Proteus Steinmetz."

My announcement caused a stir in the media. They had presumably never heard of Steinmetz, which was a disgraceful statement of their own ignorance. Even if they hadn't spent most of the past year combing old files and records, as we had, they should have heard of him. He was one of the past century's most colorful and creative scientists, a man who had been physically handicapped (he was a hunchback), but mentally able to do the equivalent of a hundred one-hand push-ups without even breathing hard. Even I had heard of him, and you'd not find many of my colleagues who'd suggest I was interested in science.

The buzzing in the media told me they were consulting their own historical data files, digging farther back in time. Even when they had done all that, they would still not understand the first thing about the true process of clone selection. It's not just a question of knowing who died over seventy-five years ago, and will therefore be out of copyright. That's a trivial exercise, one that any yearbook will solve for you. You also have to evaluate other factors. Do you know where the body is — are you absolutely *sure*! Remember, you can't clone anyone with a cell or two from the original body. You also have to be certain that it's who you think it is. All bodies seventy-five years old tend to look the same. And then, if the body happens to be really old — say, more than a couple of centuries — there are other peculiar problems that are still not undetstood at all. When NETSCO pulled its coup a few years ago by cloning Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the other three combines were envious at first. Leibniz was a real universal genius, a seventeenth-century superbrain who was good at everything. NETSCO had developed a better cell-growth technique, and they had also succeeded in locating the body of Leibniz in its undistinguished Hanover grave.

They walked tall for almost a year at NETSCO, until the clone came

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out of the forcing chambers for indoctrination. He looked nothing like the old portraits of Leibniz, and he could not grasp even the simplest abstract concepts. Oops! said the media. Wrong body.

But it wasn't as simple as that. The next year, MMG duplicated the NETSCO cell-growth technology and tried for Isaac Newton. In this case there was no doubt that they had the correct body, because it had lain undisturbed since 1727 beneath a prominent plaque in London's Westminster Abbey. The results were just as disappointing as they had been for Leibniz.

Now NETSCO and MMG have become very conservative; in my opinion, far too conservative. But since then, nobody has tried for a clone of anyone who died before 1850. The draft picking went on its thoughtful and generally cautious way, and was over in a couple of hours except for the delayed deals.

The same group of protesters was picketing the building when I left. I tried to walk quietly through them, but they must have seen my picture on one of the exterior screens showing the draft-pick process. I was buttonholed by a man in a red jumpsuit and the same thin woman in green, still carrying her placard.

"Could we speak with you for just one moment?" The man in red was very well-spoken and polite.

I hesitated, aware that news cameras were on us. "Very briefly. I'm trying to run a proof-of-concept project, you know."

"I know. Is it going well?" He was a different type from most of the demonstrators, cool and apparently intelligent. And therefore potentially more dangerous.

"I wish I could say yes," I said. "Actually, it's going rather badly. That's why I'm keen to get back out."

"I understand. All I wanted to ask you was why you — and I don't mean *you*, personally; I mean the combines — why do you find it *necessary* to use clones? You could do your work without them, couldn't you?"

I hesitated. "Let me put it this way. We could do the work without them, in just the same way as we could stumble along somehow if we were denied the use of computer power, or nuclear power. The projects would be possible, but they would be enormously more difficult. The clones augment our available brainpower, at the highest levels. So let me ask you: Why *should* we do without the clones, when they are available and useful?"

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"Because of the families. You have no right to subject the families to the misery and upset of seeing their loved ones cloned, without their having any rights in the matter. It's cruel, and unnecessary. Can't you see that?"

"No, I can't. Now, you listen to me for a minute." The cameras were still on me. It was a chance to say something that could never be said often enough. "The family holds copyright for seventy-five years after a person's death. So if you, personally, *remember* your grandparent, you have to be pushing eighty years old — and it's obvious from looking at you that you're under forty. So ask yourself, Why are all you petitioners people who are in their thirties? It's not *you* who's feeling any misery."

"But there are relatives—," he said.

"Oh yes, the relatives. Are you a relative of somebody who has been cloned?"

"Not yet. But if this sort of thing goes on—"

"Listen to me for one more minute. A long time ago, there were a lot of people around who thought that it was wrong to let books with sex in them be sold to the general public. They petitioned to have the books banned. It wasn't that they claimed to be buying the books themselves, and finding them digusting; because if they said that was the case, then people would have asked them *why* they were buying what they didn't like. Nobody was forcing anybody to buy those books. No, what the petitioners wanted was for *other* people to be stopped from buying what the *petitioners* didn't like. And you copyright-extension people are just the same. You are making a case on behalf of the relatives of the ones who are being cloned. But you never seem to ask yourself this: If cloning is so bad, why aren't the *descendants* of the clones the ones doing the complaining? They're not, you know. You never see them around here."

He shook his head. "Cloning is immoral!"

I sighed. Why bother? Not one word of what I'd said had got through to him. It didn't much matter — I'd really been speaking for the media, anyway — but it was a shame to see bigotry masquerading as public-spirited behavior. I'd seen enough of that already in my life.

I started to move off toward my waiting aircar. The lady in green clutched my arm again. "I'm going to leave instructions in my will that I want to be cremated. You'll never get me!"

*You have my word on that, lady.* But I didn't say it. I headed for the

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car, feeling an increasing urge to get back to the clean and rational regions of space. There was one good argument against cloning, and only one. It increased the total number of people, and to me that number already felt far too large.

I HAD BEEN gone only thirty hours, total; but when I arrived back at Headquarters, I learned that in my absence five new problems had occurred. I scanned the written summary that Pauli had left behind.

First, one of the thirty-two booster engines set deep in the surface of the asteroid did not respond to telemetry requests for a status report. We had to assume it was defective, and eliminate it from the final firing pattern. Second, a big solar flare was on the way. There was nothing we could do about that, but it did mean we would have to recompute the strength of the magnetic and electric fields close to Io. They would change with the strength of the Jovian magnetosphere, and that was important because the troubleshooting team in my absence had agreed on their preferred solution to the problem of adjusting impact point and arrival time. It called for strong coupling between the asteroid and the 5-million-amp flux tube of current between Io and its parent planet, Jupiter, to modify the final collision trajectory.

Third, we had lost the image data stream from one of our observing satellites, in synchronous orbit with Io. Fourth, our billion-ton asteroid had been struck by a larger-than-usual micrometeorite. This one must have massed a couple of kilograms, and it had been moving fast. It had struck off-axis from the center of mass, and the whole asteroid was now showing a tendency to rotate slowly away from our preferred orientation. Fifth, and finally, a new volcano had become very active down on the surface of Io. It was spouting sulfur up for a couple of hundred kilometers, and obscuring the view of the final-impact landmark.

After I had read Pauli's terse analysis of all the problems — nobody I ever met or heard of could summarize as clearly and briefly as he did — I switched on my communications set and asked him the only question that mattered: "Can you handle them all?"

There was a delay of almost two minutes. The troubleshooters were heading out to join the rest of our project team for their on-the-spot analyses in the Jovian system; already the light-travel time was signficant. If I didn't follow in the next day or two, radio-signal delay would make

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conversation impossible. At the moment, Jupiter was forty-five light-minutes from Earth.

"We can, Al," said Pauli's image at last. "Unless others come up in the next few hours, we can. From here until impact, we'll be working in an environment with increasing uncertainties."

"The PNU people planned it that way. Go ahead — but send me full transcripts." I left the system switched on, and went off to the next room to study the notes I had taken of the five problem areas. As I had done with every glitch that had come up since the Phase B demonstration project began, I placed the problem into one of two basic categories: act of nature, or failure of man-made element. For the most recent five difficulties, the volcano on Io and the solar flare belonged to the left-hand column: Category One, clearly natural and unpredictable events. The absence of booster-engine telemetry and the loss of satellite-image data were Catagory Two, failures of our system. They went in the right-hand column. I hesitated for a long time over the fifth event, the impact of the meteorite; finally, and with some misgivings, I assigned it also as a Category One event.

As soon as possible, I would like to follow the engineering teams out toward Jupiter for the final hours of the demonstration. However, I had two more duties to perform before I could leave. Using a coded link to Romberg AG HQ in synchronous Earth orbit, I queried the status of all the clone tanks. No anomalies were reported. By the time we returned from the final stages of Phase B, another three finished clones would be ready to move to the indoctrination facility. I needed to be there when it happened.

Next, I had to review and approve acquisition of single-use copyright for all the draft picks we had negotiated down on Earth. To give an idea of the importance of these choices, we were looking at an expenditure of $20 billion for those selections over the next twelve months. It raised the unavoidable question, Had we made the best choices?

At this stage of the game, every combine began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of their picks. All the old failures came crowding into your mind. I already mentioned NETSCO and their problem with Einstein, but we had had our full share at Romberg AG: Gregor Mendel, the originator of the genetic ideas that stood behind all the cloning efforts, had proved useless; so had Ernest Lawrence, inventor of the cyclo-

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tron, our second pick for 1958. We had (by blind luck!) traded him along with $40 million for Wolfgang Pauli. Even so, we had made a bad error of judgment, and the fact that others made the same mistake was no consolation. As for Marconi, even though he looked like the old pictures of him, and was obviously highly intelligent, the clone who emerged turned out to be so indolent and casual about everything that he ruined any project he worked on. I had placed him in a cushy and undemanding position and allowed him to fiddle about with his own interests, which were mainly sports and good-looking women. (As Pauli acidly remarked, "And you say that *we're* the smart ones, doing all the work?")

It's not the evaluation of a person's past record that's difficult, because we are talking about famous people who have done a great deal; written masses of books, articles, and papers; and been thoroughly evaluated by their own contemporaries. Even with all that, a big question still remains: Will the things that made the original man or woman great still be there in the cloned form? In other words, *just what is it that is inherited?*

That's a very hard question to answer. The theory of evolution was proposed 170 years ago, but we're still fighting the old Nature-versus-Nurture battle. Is a human genius decided mainly by heredity, or by the way the person was raised? One old argument against cloning for genius was based on the importance of Nuture. It goes as follows: an individual is the product of both heredity (which is all you get in the clone) and environment. Since it is impossible to reproduce someone's environment, complete with parents, grandparents, friends, and teachers, you can't raise a clone that will be exactly like the original individual.

I'll buy that logic. We can't make ourselves an intellectually exact copy of anyone.

However, the argument was also used to prove that cloning for superior intellectual performance would be impossible. But of course, it actually proves nothing of the sort. If you take two peas from the same pod, and put one of them in deep soil next to a high wall, and the other in shallow soil out in the open, they *must* do different things if both are to thrive. The one next to the wall has to make sure it gets enough sunshine, which it can do by maximizing leaf area; the one in shallow soil has to get enough moisture, which it does through putting out more roots. The *superior* strain of peas is the one whose genetic composition allows it to adapt to whatever environment it is presented with.

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People are not peas, but in one respect they are not very different from them: some have superior genetic composition to others. That's all you can ask for. If you clone someone from a century ago, the last thing you want is someone who is *identical* to the original. They would be stuck in a twentieth-century mind-set. What is needed is someone who can adapt to and thrive in *today's* environment — whether that is now the human equivalent of shade, or of shallow soil. The success of the original clone-template tells us a very important thing, that we are dealing with a superior physical brain. What that brain thinks is the year 2040 *should* be different from what it would have thought in the year 1940 — otherwise the clone would be quite useless. And the criteria for "useless" change with time, too.

All these facts and a hundred others were running around inside my head as I reviewed the list for this year. Finally I made a note to suggest that J. B. S. Haldane, whom we had looked at and rejected three years ago on the grounds of unmanageability, ought to be looked at again and acquired if possible. History shows that he had wild views on politics and society, but there was no question at all about the quality of his mind. I thought I had learned a lot about interfacing with difficult scientific personalities in the past few years.

When I was satisfied with my final list, I transmitted everything to Joe Delacorte, who was still down on Earth, and headed for the transition room. A personal shipment pod ought to be waiting for me there. I hoped I would get a good one. At the very least, I'd be in it for the next eight days. Last time I went out to the Jovian system, the pod internal lighting and external antenna failed after three days. Have you ever sat in the dark for seventy-two hours, a hundred million miles from the nearest human, unable to send or receive messages? I didn't know if anyone realized I was in trouble. All I could do was sit tight — and I mean tight; pods are *small* —and stare out at the stars.

This time the pod was in good working order. I was able to participate in every problem that hit the project over the next four days. There were plenty of them, all small, and all significant. One of the fuel-supply ships lost a main ion drive. The supply ship was not much more than a vast bag of volatiles and a small engine, and it had almost no brain at all in its computer, not even enough to figure out an optimal use of its drives. We had to chase after and corral it as though we were pursuing a great lumber-

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ing elephant. Then three members of the impact-monitoring team came down with food poisoning — salmonella, which was almost certainly their own fault. You can say anything you like about throwing away spoiled food, but you can't get a sloppy crew to take much notice.

Then, for variety, we lost a sensor through sheer bad program design. In turning one of our imaging systems from star sensing to Io-Jupiter sensing, we tracked it right across the solar disk and burned out all the photocells. According to the engineers, that's the sort of blunder you don't make after kindergarten — but somebody did it.

Engineering errors are easy to correct. It was much trickier when one of the final-approach-coordination groups, a team of two men and one woman, chose the day before the Io rendezvous to have a violent sexual argument. They were millions of kilometers away from anyone, so there was not much we could do except talk to them. We did that, hoped they wouldn't kill each other, and made plans to do without their inputs if we had to.

Finally, one day before impact, an unplanned and anomalous firing of a rocket on the asteroid's forward surface caused a significant change of velocity of the whole body.

I ought to explain that I did little or nothing to solve any of these problems. I was too slow, too ignorant, and not creative enough. While I was still struggling to comprehend what the problem parameters were, my troubleshooters were swarming all over it. They threw proposals and counterproposals at each other so fast that I could hardly note them, still less contribute to them. For example, in the case of the anomalous rocket firing that I mentioned, compensation for the unwanted thrust called for an elaborate balancing act of lateral and radial engines, rolling and nudging the asteroid back into its correct approach path. The team had mapped out the methods in minutes, written the necessary optimization programs in less than half an hour, and implemented their solution before I understood the geometry of what was going on.

So what did I do while all this was happening? I continued to make my two columns: act of nature, or failure of man-made element. The list was growing steadily, and I was spending a lot of time looking at it.

We were coming down to the final few hours now, and all the combines were working flat out to solve their own problems. In an engineering project of this size, many thousands of things could go wrong. We were

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working in extreme physical conditions, hundreds of millions of kilometers away from Earth and our standard test environments. In the intense charged-particle field near Io, cables broke at loads well below their rated capacities, hard-vacuum welds showed air-bleed effects, and lateral jets were fired and failed to produce the predicted attitude adjustments. And on top of all this, the pressure, isolation, and bizarre surroundings were too much for some of the workers. We had human failure to add to engineering failure. The test was tougher than anyone had realized — even PNU, who was supposed to make the demonstration project just this side of impossible.

I was watching the performance of the other three combines only a little less intently than I was watching our own. At five hours from contact time, NETSCO apparently suffered a communications loss with their asteroid-control system. Instead of heading for Io impact, the asteroid veered away, spiraling in toward the bulk of Jupiter itself.

BP Megation lost it at impact minus three hours, when a vast explosion on one of their asteroid forward boosters threw the kilometer-long body into a rapid tumble. Within an hour, by some miracle of improvisation, their engineering team had found a method of stabilizing the wobbling mass. But by then it was too late to return to nominal impact time and place. Their asteroid skimmed into the surface of Io an hour early, sending up a long, tear-shaped mass of ejecta from the moon's turbulent surface.

That left just two of us, MMG and Romberg AG. We both had our hands full. The Jovian system is filled with electrical, magnetic, and gravitational energies bigger than anything in the Solar System except the Sun itself. The two remaining combines were trying to steer their asteroid into a pinpoint landing through a great storm of interference that made every control command and every piece of incoming telemetry suspect. In the final hour I didn't even follow the exchanges between my troubleshooters. Oh, I could *hear* them easily enough. What I couldn't do was comprehend them, enough to know what was happening.

Pauli would toss a scrap of comment at von Neumann, and, while I was trying to understand that, von Neumann would have done an assessment, keyed in for a databank status report, gabbled a couple of questions to Fermi and an instruction to Edison, and at the same time be absorbing scribbled notes and diagrams from those two. I don't know if what they

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were doing was *potentially* intelligible to me or not; all I know is that they were going about fifty times too fast for me to follow. And it didn't much matter what I understood — they were getting the job done. I was still trying to divide all problems into my Category One - Category Two columns, but it got harder and harder.

In the final hour I didn't look or listen to what my own team was doing. We had one band of telemetry trained on the MMG project, and more and more that's where my attention was focused. I assumed they were having the same kind of communications trouble as we were — that crackling discharge field around Io made everything difficult. But their team was handling it. They were swinging smoothly into impact.

And then, with only ten minutes to go, the final small adjustment was made. It should have been a tiny nudge from the radial jets; enough to fine-tune the impact position a few hundred meters, and no more. Instead, there was a joyous roar of a radial jet at full, uncontrolled thrust. The MMG asteroid did nothing unusual for a few seconds (a billion tons is a lot of inertia), then began to drift lazily sideways, away from its nominal trajectory.

The jet was still firing. And that should have been impossible, because the first thing that the MMG team would do was send a POWER-OFF signal to the engine.

The time for impact came when the MMG asteroid was still a clear fifty kilometers out of position, and accelerating away. I saw the final collision, and the payload scraped along the surface of Io in a long, jagged scar that looked nothing at all like the neat, punched hole that we were supposed to achieve.

And we did achieve it, a few seconds later. Our asteroid came in exactly where and when it was supposed to, driving in exactly vertical to the surface. The plume of ejecta had hardly begun to rise from Io's red-and-yellow surface before von Neumann was pulling a bottle of bourbon from underneath the communications console.

I didn't object — I only wished I were there physically to share it, instead of being stuck in my own pod, short of rendezvous with our main ship. I looked at my final list, still somewhat incomplete. Was there a pattern to it? Ten minutes of analysis didn't show one. No one had tried anything — this time. Someday, and it might be tomorrow, somebody on another combine would have a bright idea; and then it would be a whole new ball game.

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While I was still pondering my list, my control console began to buzz insistently. I switched it on expecting contact with my own trouble-shooting team. Instead, I saw the despondent face of Brunel, MMG's own team leader — the man above all others that I would have liked to work on my side.

He nodded at me when my picture appeared on his screen. He was smoking one of his powerful black cigars, stuck in the side of his mouth. The expression on his face was as impenetrable as ever. He never let his feelings show there. "I assume you saw it, did you?" he said around the cigar. "We're out of it. I just called to congratulate you — again."

"Yeah, I saw it. Tough luck. At least you came second."

"Which, as you know very well, is no better than coming last." He sighed and shook his head. "We still have no idea what happened. Looks like either a programming error, or a valve sticking open. We probably won't know for weeks. And I'm not sure I care."

I maintained a sympathetic silence.

"I sometimes think we should just give up, Al," he said. "I can beat those other turkeys, but I can't compete with you. That's six in a row that you've won. It's wearing me out. You've no idea how much frustration there is in that."

I had never known Brunel to reveal so much of his feelings before.

"I think I do understand your problems," I said.

And I did. I knew exactly how he felt — more than he would believe. To suffer through a whole, endless sequence of minor, niggling mishaps was heartbreaking. No single trouble was ever big enough for a trouble-shooting team to stop, isolate it, and be able to say, there's dirty work going on here. But their cumulative effect was another matter. One day it was a morass of shipments missing their correct flights, another time a couple of minus signs dropped into computer programs, or a key worker struck down for a few days by a random virus, permits misfiled, manifests mislaid, or licenses wrongly dated.

I knew all those mishaps personally. I should, because I invented most of them. I think of it as the death of a thousand cuts. No one can endure all that and still hope to win a Phase B study.

"How would you like to work on the Europan Metamorph?" I asked. "I think you'd love it."

He looked very thoughtful, and for the first time, I believe I could

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actually read his expression. "Leave MMG, you mean?" he said. "Maybe. I don't know what I want anymore. Let me think about it. I'd like to work with you, Al — you're a genius."

Brunel was wrong about that, of course. I'm certainly no genius. All I can do what I've always done — handle people, take care of unpleasant details (quietly!), and make sure things get done that need doing. And of course, do what I do best: make sure that some things that need doing *don't* get done.

There *are* geniuses in the world, real geniuses. Not me, though. The man who decided to clone me, secretly — *there* I'd suggest you have a genius.

*"Say, don't you remember, they called me Al. . . ."*

Of course, I don't remember. That song was written in the 1930s, and I didn't die until 1947, but no clone remembers anything of the forefather life. The fact that we tend to be knowledgeable about our originals' period is an expression of interest in those individuals, not memories from them. I know the Chicago of the Depression years intimately, as well as I know today; but it is all learned knowledge. I have no actual recollection of events. I don't *remember.*

So even if you don't remember, call me Al anyway. Everyone did.


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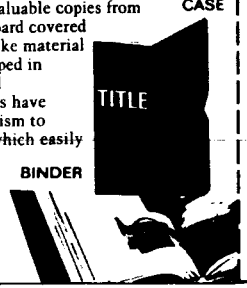


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# SCIENCE

## ISAAC ASIMOV

### THE CHANGING DISTANCE

I KEEP A professional eye on manifestations of scientific innocence. After all, I am a science writer and a professional "explainer," and I find that the public, if I listen, will tell me what it is that they want explained.

For instance, on September 28, 1988, the planet Mars made one of its closest approaches to Earth. The media, inevitably, made a big thing out of it. "Mars in close approach to Earth," they trumpeted.

I could well imagine that people who knew nothing about astronomy, reading this, would imagine that Mars was peeping over their shoulders and that its presence (perhaps only a few yards away) had some sort of eerie significance.

I might well have let that go were it not for the fact that I found myself involved in the mystique. I received a phone call from a very pleasant fellow at one of the television networks. He wanted to interview me on the subject of Mars.

The studio was not far off, so my hatred of travel was not activated, and I agreed to his request. I walked over and took my seat under the lights.

I was sure of the first question, and I was ready.

"How about this close approach of Mars to Earth," asked the interviewer in an awed tone. "What does it mean?"

"Not a darned thing," I replied, cheerfully, and explained.

It isn't easy to explain in two sentences, but that didn't bother me overmuch because I knew that the soap box of my science essay series was awaiting me. So sit back and let me talk about the distance of some astronomical objects from Earth, and how those distances change.

Let's begin with the Moon, which is, of all sizable bodies, the nearest to the Earth. It goes around the Earth in 27.32 days (relative to

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the stars) and, in doing so, it stays at roughly the same distance from us.

The average distance of the Moon from the Earth, center to center, was calculated with reasonable accuracy even by the ancient Greeks. In the last few decades, however, we've bounced microwaves off the Moon and, from the time it took the microwave beam to go and return, we've managed to determine the distance of the Moon to within a few hundred meters.

The Moon is, on the average, 384,400.5 kilometers (238,906.5 miles) from the Earth.

If the Moon were going about the Earth in a perfect circle, that would be its distance from the Earth at all times, but the Moon's orbit is *not* a perfect circle, but an ellipse. The ellipse is quite close to a circle; so close that if we were to draw the Moon's orbit to scale on a sheet of paper, it would look like a circle to us — nevertheless it is not quite a circle.

Where a circle has one center, an ellipse has two "foci," one on either side of the center. In the case of the Moon's elliptical orbit, Earth is located at one of the foci, that is, to one side of the center of the ellipse.

The straight line that passes through the two foci from one side of the ellipse to the other is the "major axis." When the Moon is at that end of the major axis that is at the same side as is the Earth-occupied focus, it is as close to Earth as it can get. It is then at "perigee," from Greek words meaning "near by Earth." When the Moon is at the other end of the major axis, it is as far from Earth as it can get and it is then at "apogee," from Greek words meaning "away from the Earth." (See Figure 1.)

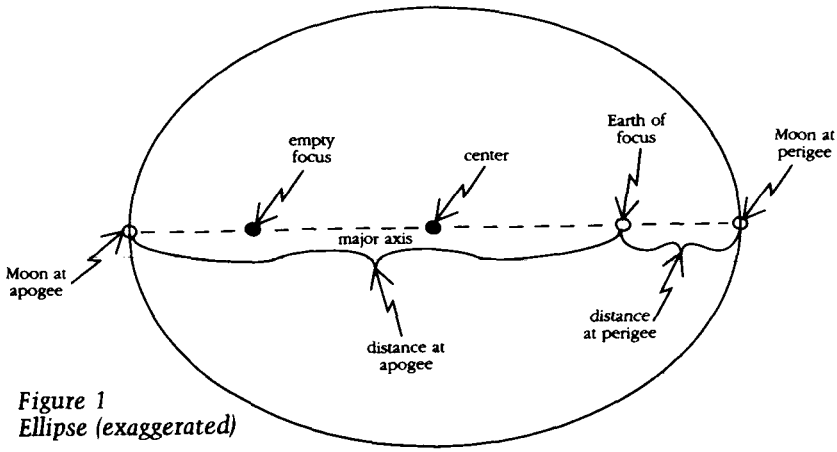


*Figure 1*
*Ellipse (exaggerated)*

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The Moon, as it travels in its orbit about the Earth, moves from perigee to apogee, and back to perigee. The difference in distance that results isn't much, because the orbit isn't very elliptical. Still, at perigee, the Moon is only 356,375 kilometers (221,451 miles) from Earth; while at apogee, it is 406,720 kilometers (252,736 miles) from Earth.

This difference in distance over the course of the four week orbit is thus 50,345 kilometers (31,284 miles) or about 13 percent of its average distance.

Does that difference in distance affect the Moon's appearance in any way? It certainly does. The apparent diameter of the Moon when it is at perigee is 33.48 minutes of arc, but at apogee it is only 29.37 minutes of arc. The Moon at perigee is 14 percent wider in appearance than it is at apogee. Its area at perigee is 30 percent greater than at apogee, and this means that if the Moon happens to be full at perigee it is 30 percent brighter than it is when it happens to be full at apogee.

Would you think that that would matter? Apparently, it doesn't to the general public. They have never seemed aware (as far as I know) of the fact that the full Moon can be 30 percent brighter at some times than at others.

Let's consider the Sun next. The earth travels about the Sun once every 365.2422 days. Its orbit, as it does so, is nearly circular so that the Sun remains more or less at the same distance from Earth at all times. Its average distance from the Earth is just about 149.6 million kilometers (93.0 million miles), center to center, or 389 times the distance of the Moon.

But the Earth's orbit is not a perfect circle either; it is also slightly elliptical. Earth's orbit is less elliptical than the Moon's is. The extent of the ellipticity of an orbit is indicated by its "eccentricity." The eccentricity of a circle is exactly zero, but the eccentricity of the Moon's elliptical orbit is 0.055, which, as you see, is not far removed from zero. The eccentricity of the Earth's elliptical orbit is, however, only 0.0167.

Nevertheless, even the slight eccentricity of Earth's orbit means that Earth's distance from the Sun changes measurably in the course of a year. When the Earth is at "perihelion" ("near by the Sun"), the Sun is 147.1 million kilometers (91.4 million miles) from the Earth. At "aphelion" ("away from the Sun"), the Sun is 152.1 million kilometers (94.5 million miles) from the Earth.

The difference in distance is 5.0 million kilometers (3.1 million miles), which is only 5.4 percent of its average distance. The smaller

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percentage difference in the changing distance of the Sun as compared to the changing distance of the Moon is the result of the fact that Earth's orbit is less eccentric than the Moon's orbit.

The changing distance of the Sun reflects itself in the Sun's apparent size in the sky. When the Earth is at perihelion, the Sun has an apparent diameter of 32.60 minutes of arc; when the Earth is at aphelion, the Sun is only 31.63 minutes of arc in diameter. At perihelion, then, the Sun is 3 percent wider in appearance, which makes it 6 percent larger in apparent area which, in turn, means that it yields 6 percent more light and heat at perihelion than at aphelion.

However, if the 30 percent additional light of the full Moon at perigee goes unnoticed, you can be sure that the 6 percent additional light of the Sun at perihelion is ignored. (This is especially so since perihelion, at this epoch of time, happens to come when it is winter in the northern hemisphere, and it is in the northern hemisphere that most human beings live. The additional brightness of the Sun is thus masked by the fact that the Sun is, at that time, lower in the sky and remains above the horizon for less time.)

Even so, in recent decades this perihelion/aphelion difference, combined with the precession of the equinoxes and slight periodic changes in Earth's orbital eccentricity and axial tipping, has been advanced as a cause for long term swings in Earth's climate, including the production of ice ages. That, however, need not concern us here.

Now we can go on to Mars, which is quite another proposition. Since the Moon circles the Earth, and the Earth circles the Sun, both bodies seem to make a more or less smooth circuit of the sky, travelling at a nearly steady pace from west to east, against the background of the stars (if you discount the effect of Earth's rotation).

Mars, however, circles the Sun as Earth does, but at a different distance and at a different speed, so that you have two separate orbits instead of one. This means that Mars's apparent motion in the sky is far more complicated than that of either the Moon or the Sun.

Whereas Earth is at an average distance of 149.6 million kilometers (93.0 million miles) from the Sun, Mars is at an average distance of 228 million kilometers (142 million miles) from the Sun. This means that Mars is 1.52 as far from the Sun as the Earth is and, in moving around its orbit, Mars must travel a distance that is 1.52 times that which Earth must traverse.

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In addition, Earth, being closer to the Sun than Mars is, is more strongly influenced by the Sun's gravitational pull and whips along more quickly in its shorter orbit than Mars does in its longer one. Whereas the Earth moves about the Sun at an average speed of 29.79 kilometers per second (18.51 miles per second), Mars moves about the Sun at an average speed of only 24.13 kilometers per second (14.99 miles per second). Therefore, it takes Mars longer to complete a circuit about the Sun than you would expect from its longer orbit. Whereas Earth moves about the Sun in 365.2422 days, Mars moves about it in 686.98 Earth-days or 1.88 Earth-years.

This means that, as Earth and Mars both race about the Sun in the same direction, Earth is forever overtaking Mars, racing ahead, gaining an entire lap, coming up from behind, overtaking it again, and so on, over and over, for all the billions of years that both have existed.

This further means that Mars is closest to Earth at the moment when Earth catches up with Mars and is about to pass it. Both are then on the same side of the Sun, and at the passing point, a line drawn from the Earth to the Sun will, if extended, pass through Mars as well. See Figure 2 (assuming that both planets are moving in the same plane, which they aren't, quite).

As seen from Earth, it would seem, at that moment of passing Mars, that Mars at midnight would

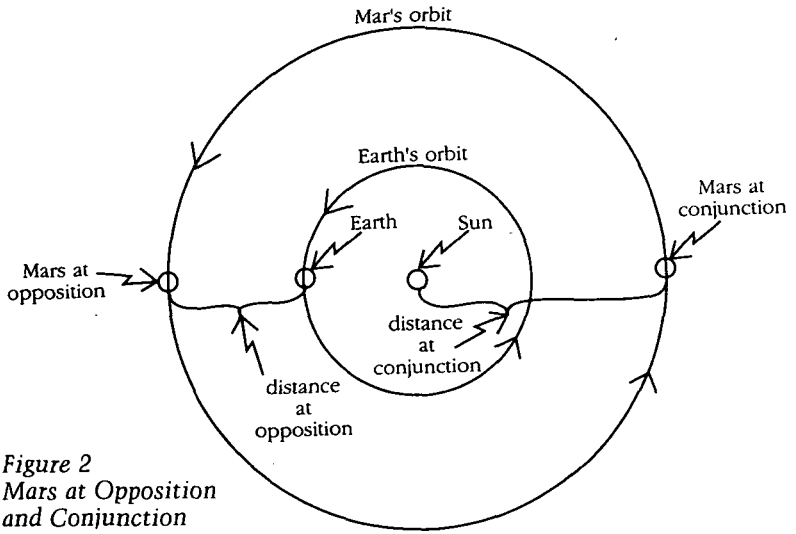


*Figure 2*
*Mars at Opposition and Conjunction*

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be as close to zenith as it could get, and was exactly on the opposite side of the Earth from the position of the Sun. Because Mars and the Sun are at opposite sides of the Earth, Mars is then said to be in "opposition," and it is at opposition that Mars is closest to Earth.

As Earth moves past opposition, gaining on Mars, it moves farther and farther away from Mars. Eventually, it moves so far ahead that it is on the opposite side of the Sun from Mars. At that point, it is as far away from Mars as it can get. As seen from Earth, it would seem that Mars, at that moment, being on the other side of the Sun, has come very near it in the sky. Mars and the Sun are in "conjunction" (from Latin word meaning "to join together"). At conjunction, Earth and Mars are farthest apart.

If Mars were standing still, it would take Earth just half a year to move from opposition to conjunction, and then another half year to move back to opposition. However, Mars is chasing along, too — not as quickly as Earth is, but quickly enough to make Earth take a distinctly longer time to gain a complete lap on Mars.

In fact, it takes Earth, on the average, 779.94 days (2.137 years) to gain a lap and go from one opposition to the next.

Now suppose that Earth and Mars both travelled about the Sun in circular orbits. In that case, at opposition, the distance from Mars to Earth would be Mars's distance from the Sun minus Earth's distance from the Sun. This would come to 78 million kilometers (48.5 million miles).

At conjunction, Earth and Mars would be on opposite sides of the Sun and the distance between them would be 78 million kilometers plus the full width of the Earth's orbit (look at Figure 2, if that isn't obvious to you). Earth and Mars would then be separated by a distance of 377 million kilometers (234 million miles).

The distance at conjunction would then be 4.8 times as great as at opposition, and Mars, at opposition, would shine something like 23 times as brightly as it would at conjunction.

Surely, *that* would be noticed.

Well, yes and no. At opposition, Mars is high in the sky and is visible all night long. As it passes opposition, however, it moves closer and closer to the Sun, and is visible for less and less of the night. Eventually, it is lost in the Sun and is not visible in the night sky at all, or only briefly in the twilight or dawn.

Mars therefore grows less conspicuous, not only because it grows dimmer, but also because it slowly leaves the night sky and, to the

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non-astronomer, these two reasons may be confused.

However, the orbits of Earth and Mars are *not* circular. Earth's is nearly circular, to be sure, but Mars's orbit departs from that ideal by quite a bit. While Earth's orbital eccentricity is, as I said earlier, 0.0167, the orbital eccentricity of Mars is a comparatively whopping 0.0934, greater even than that of the Moon.

This means that, at its aphelion, Mars is 249 million kilometers (155 million miles) from the Sun, while at its perihelion it is only 207 million kilometers (129 million miles) from the Sun. The difference is 42 million kilometers (26 million miles) which is 18.4 percent of the average distance of Mars from the Sun.

For simplicity's sake, suppose we consider Earth's orbit a circle, which it very nearly is.

Opposition can take place anywhere along Earth's orbit. It can take place when Earth passes Mars at the Martian aphelion, or at the Martian perihelion, or anywhere in between.

If opposition takes place at the Martian aphelion, then the distance between Earth and Mars is 249 - 149, or 100 million kilometers (62 million miles). If opposition takes place at the Martian perihelion, it is 207 -149, or 58 million kilometers (36 million miles). Because Earth's orbit is not exactly circular, that minimum distance can sometimes be as small as 55.5 million kilometers (34.5 million miles).

Now forget about the Sun. Consider only oppositions, when Mars is high in the sky and stays in the sky all night long, and when the Sun is exactly on the other side of the Earth. Mars is considerably closer to Earth at some of these oppositions than at others (see Figure 3).

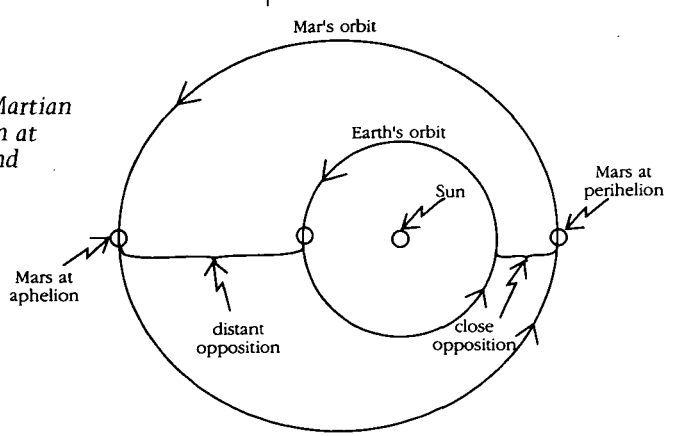


*Figure 3 - Martian Conjunction at Aphelion and Perihelion*

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For that reason, Mars, in opposition at perihelion, is 3 1/4 times as bright as when it is in opposition at aphelion. And *this* is noticeable.

The noticeability is particularly important because of the matter of color. Venus and Jupiter, the two brightest planets, are white. Mars, when it is in opposition at perihelion, is actually slightly brighter than Jupiter, but is distinctly red in color. It is, in fact, the brightest object in the sky that has a red color.

The redness, we know, is because its soil is rich in iron, so that what we see is the equivalent of a rusty planet. To the ancients, however, who observed Mars in the days before the iron age, when rust was not a familiar item to them, the color meant only one thing — *blood.*

It is no wonder, then, that the Sumerians, who were the first star gazers in any systematic sense, named the planet in honor of Nergal, their god of war, destruction, and death. The Greeks followed that tradition by naming the planet Ares after their own god of war, and the Romans called it Mars after theirs. We keep the Roman name.

Naturally, a heavenly object that beams down upon us with the color of blood and with a name that personifies war, destruction, and death, is going to be regarded as baleful and threatening. Every other year it shines through the night like a red jewel, and every once in a while it shines particularly brightly. At those bright times, when it is in opposition at or near perihelion, it would not be surprising if the hearts of people turned faint and they expected the worst.

That is pure superstition, of course, but it is superstition that rules human hearts and minds far more than cool reason ever does (or did, or perhaps, will).

Even after the astronomical facts were understood and the notion of Mars as a god of war had receded into a merely mythical object, the association of Mars with evil remained.

Prior to 1965, Martian oppositions were viewed with great excitement by astronomers. There was no superstitious fear involved in their case, but rather the presence of great hopes. Once the telescope was invented in 1608, it became possible to view Mars and see much more than could be seen by eye alone. At opposition, when Mars was closest, it could be seen larger and clearer than at other times, and when the opposition came at perihelion, it could be seen largest and clearest of all.

Every thirty-one years or so, Mars is in opposition at or very

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near perihelion, and then astronomers unlimber their telescopes, prepare for observations, and exude a great deal of excitement that finds its way into the public press. People then marvel over the "close approach of Mars" and perhaps feel a bit nervous about it, too.

At each close approach, of course, telescopes, spectroscopes, photographic techniques, and so on, had made some advances over the situation at the previous close approach a generation earlier. There was therefore always the chance that surface markings might be seen more clearly than ever before, that Mars might be mapped more definitively, that unexpected discoveries might be made, and so on.

In 1877, when Mars made a close approach, the American astronomer Asaph Hall (1829-1907) seized the opportunity to carry on a deliberate search for any small satellites that might happen to be very close to Mars. (They had to be small and close, or they would have been discovered long before.) On August 11, he gave up, but his wife, Angelina Stickney Hall, said, "Give it one more night, Asaph." He did, and discovered two satellites he named Phobos ("fear") and Deimos ("Dread") after the sons of Mars.

At that same opposition, the Italian astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli (1835-1910) was able to map Mars better than anyone ever had before. He noted narrow dark lines that he took to be waterways, and he called them "canali," which was Italian for "channels," a name given to any thin, natural stretch of water like the English Channel.

The word was translated as "canals" in English, however, which was a crucial error, for that word is applied to *artificial* waterways. At once, many non-astronomers (and a few astronomers) felt that evidence had been discovered of life on Mars. And not only life, but an advanced technology capable of constructing canals.

After all, Mars was a small planet with a surface gravity only 2/5 that of Earth, so it might be slowly losing its water. The canals would be built in order to bring water from the polar icecaps to the agricultural lands in the warmer parts of the planet.

The American astronomer Percival Lowell (1855-1916) took up this view. He established an observatory in Arizona where Mars could be viewed through the thin, dry air of desert uplands. He published maps showing Mars to be criss-crossed with straight canals, meeting at "oases," and wrote a couple of books that proclaimed Mars to be the abode of advanced life.

Most astronomers were skepti-

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cal, but the general public ate it up. Not only did they accept the notion of advanced Martian life, but the old superstitions of the bloody planet still exerted their influence and Martian life was assumed to be evil.

In 1898, the British writer Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) capitalized on this by publishing *The War of The Worlds*, the first book, as far as I know, to deal with interplanetary warfare. He meant it as a social satire. The European nations, Great Britain in particular, had just finished carving up Africa without any regard for the Africans, and Wells pictured the Martians as landing in Great Britain and taking it over without any regard for the British.

The general public, however, ignored the satire and concentrated entirely on the horrors of the Martian invasion and the evil nature of the Martians.

That book fastened onto science fiction what became virtually a convention: Martians were advanced far beyond Earth technology, but they were decadent and evil, and because their planet was dying they lusted to conquer Earth.

I don't know how many Martian invasion stories were written between 1900 and 1965, but virtually every one must have done its bit to bolster the age-long superstitious view of evil Mars — that had arisen only because the poor planet was rusty and was close enough to us so that the rust showed, especially at its near approaches.

Even as late as 1938 (almost exactly fifty years ago, as I write) the dangers of a Martian invasion remained high in human minds. On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles (1915-1985) produced a radio show dramatizing Wells's novel. He changed the site of the Martian landing from Great Britain to New Jersey and told the tale by means of fictitious news bulletins and government announcements, like those that had characterized the war scare of the previous month, the one that had ended in the West's surrender at Munich to Hitler.

Welles made it quite plain that the story was fiction, but a large number of people in New Jersey went into panic and clogged the highways as they tried to get away from the invading Martians.

I was a little bit bitter about this in my interview on Mars, when I was asked to comment on the 1938 invasion scare.

I said, "Isn't it sad that you can tell people that the ozone layer is being depleted, that the forests are being cut down, that the deserts are advancing steadily, that the greenhouse effect will raise the sea level 200 feet, that overpopulation is

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choking us, that pollution is killing us, that nuclear war may destroy us — and they yawn and settle back for a comfortable nap? But tell them that the Martians are landing, and they scream and run."

That statement was edited out and did not appear on the air.

The myth of evil Martians and their advanced technology did not come to an entire end until nearly ninety years after Schiaparelli had unwittingly begun it.

On November 28, 1964, the Mars probe *Mariner 4* was launched. On July 14, 1965, it passed within 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) of the Martian surface and took a series of twenty photographs that were beamed back to Earth. No canals were shown on those photographs. Only craters, that looked very much like those on the Moon.

Other probes followed, and by now Mars has been mapped in detail. On its surface there are not only craters, but extinct volcanoes, an enormous canyon, some jumbled terrains, markings that look for all the world like dried river beds, and ice-caps that are, in part at least, frozen carbon dioxide. There is also a very thin atmosphere that contains no oxygen to speak of.

What Mars doesn't have is any sign of canals, any sign of liquid water, any sign of life.

So now what does it matter if Mars makes a close approach? No professional astronomer is going to attempt to find out anything about Mars by looking at it through a telescope. The probes have told us far more than any earth-bound telescope can possibly tell us, and any further information of any importance whatever must come from future probes, with or without people aboard.

To be sure, it is still fun for amateur astronomers to look at Mars at these times of close approach. They will see the Martian orb larger and more clearly than they will at other times.

There's nothing wrong with that, but there's no reason for awe, or for vague foreboding or for calling in people to explain the significance of this supposedly fearsome or eerie phenomenon.

No reason, that is, other than a superstition that is five thousand years old, and was groundless from the very start.

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*If we dared to plug in and turn on all our appliances, we'd merely blow a fuse or two. Sabastian Eeps, entrepreneur and sometime con man, does just that and comes up with a bad smell, magic and . . . much more.*

# The Return of the Electrozoids

**By Wayne Wightman**

EXCEPT FOR THE howling in the walls, life was great, and I was just about to rake in the cash from my latest religious experience. I'd mixed myself the perfect Ramos fizz and was relaxing on the sofa, trying to decide what color Maserati to buy, when someone knocked at the front door. Whoever it was could wait. A green Maserati would be nice.

Religion is a wonderful thing. For one tightly scheduled week, UPS trucks had been unloading high-grade stereos, computers, shortwave radios, TVs, satellite dishes, and other consumer electronics at my doorstep. The postman had delivered dozens of cameras, binoculars, bundles of computer programs, some stuff I hadn't had the chance to open up yet; and trucking firms with mysteriously bland-sounding names brought in industrial air-conditioning units, heavyweight Massinex/Mainline computers, and the liquid nitrogen to keep the things efficient enough to calculate the focal length of a gnat's eye at the distance of Alpha Centauri. And it was all free. It was religion.

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The other day, one of the drivers had asked, "What's all that moaning noise in the house? You got a happy girl in there?"

That was the first time I'd heard it. I smiled and signed the delivery slip. "Probably just some feedback."

"You building a missile-tracking system, or what?"

"No, I just have a hell of a time balancing my checkbook, you know?"

"Do I ever." He pulled his cap down on his head. "Those guidance systems can really eat up your paycheck."

The howling wasn't feedback. It was in the walls — pipes or something — so I called my cousin, a plumber, who came out and had a few beers and said it was most likely wind up through the floor joists. I was glad. I didn't want to have to start taking the spirit world seriously again. I gave him a portable stereo, and he boogied out the door listening to Elvis.

Whoever was knocking at the door was persistent — but I was expecting no more deliveries till tomorrow. The orange-flower water in the Ramos fizz smelled like the neck of a very expensive lady. Maybe a metallic midnight-blue Maserati.

If I had paid for the stuff that filled up my house, I estimated I'd be out about one and a half mil — these people had sent it to me for nothing because I was no longer just Sebastian Eeps, metaphysical troubleshooter — I was Sebastian Eeps, Director of The Industrial Consumer's Product Testing Bureau, and I had a buyer at the San Francisco Airport who would pay me 50 percent retail for whatever I delivered to him on Saturday, *and* in the shirt pocket of my traveling clothes was a ticket, nonstop, to the Vesco Islands, play spot of the Caribbean.

After my religious experience, I had closed up my fortune-telling boutique out at the mall and had sold my exorcising franchise. My life-plan had come to me in an instant.

I'd been lying out in the backyard drinking discount gin and thinking over the spirit removal I had scheduled for the afternoon. Some gink over in the airport district claimed his house was haunted by all the puppies he had drowned during his first marriage. Well, I'd done dogs before, but it was the collection aspect that was preying on my thoughts. He said there were about fifty of them, and I said I'd do the house for ten bucks a dog, and people in that part of town are famous for their double-digit paychecks. Anyway, I was lying outside listening to the sounds of nature when it happened.

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The mockingbird that had been sitting in the peach tree next door harassing me suddenly went silent and then started making a strange garbling noise. I listened carefully, almost able to make out the words. At first it sounded like a tracheotomy patient trying to play a nose flute, but then I understood what it was telling me. "There is no spiritual world," it said. "And worms are waiting to eat your face." I had suspected as much.

If one has a receptive mind, much can be learned from nature.

I did a bit of structural analysis on this revelation while I got on my feet. It seemed somewhat odd that I should be informed through a mystical experience that there was no spiritual world, but how else is one to learn such things? I'd seen a lot of bizarre things in my exorcising days, but in truth, the hysterical slant-heads that hired me were the weirdest. Over the years, I'd grown weary of getting Uncle Wilmot's spirit out of the microwave and deciphering Satanist messages that were coded into shoe advertisements.

Before I'd finished brushing the lawn clippings out of my hair, it became completely obvious to me that as a physical entity in the material world, the only worthwhile thing to do — the only rational and justifiable thing to do — was to go for the goods, the items, the merchandise, the *things* of life. And maybe I could spend the next winter in the Caribbean.

That had been six weeks before. Now my house was stacked floor to ceiling with the means of rescuing me from a spiritual life, and someone was still banging on the front door.

I put down the Ramos and threaded my way through the neat stacks of electronic wealth. The way the person was banging, I figured it was probably the Vietnam-vet paperboy — he crept through the neighborhood at dawn and planted the papers like Claymores and never had a collection problem from anyone — although I had teased him a bit once or twice by playing helicopter noises from the outdoor speakers and screaming, "Incoming! Incoming!"

Unfortunately, it wasn't the vet — it was Zuzanna Pitkowski, a woman I'd worked with a decade ago when I believed in government. We still saw each other occasionally, and she still made me hormone-crazy if I looked at her too long, but I hadn't seen her in a few months. And Zuzanna had a child with her and wanted a favor.

"Keep her a week?" I looked down at the kid she held by the hand. "A week? What do I know about kids? I'm in the middle of a serious

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project. A child? An infant? A whole week?"

"I'm seven," the kid said. "I'm not an infant." It was apparently a girl from the configuration of its head. She had little round cheeks and held some kind of rag thing under her arm that looked like it had been chewed on by animals.

"You owe me a few favors, Eeps," Zuzanna said. "My car used to be worth about twelve thousand. After that trip you took to Denver—"

"All right, all right. Why bring up bad memories?"

That look on her face when I had slid into her driveway with the hood and most of the paint missing was one of those grim moments that would stick with me for a long time. But I had made enough bucks on that venture to be very adult about it, so, for her own good, I had bought her a sensible, previously owned Ford that I would never be tempted to borrow.

"When you brought my car back, it was worth a dollar eighty-five. That was the highest of three estimates. What's that noise?"

"Zuzanna. . . ." I tried to look confessional and pathetic. "Zuzanna, I recently had a religious experience."

Her eyebrows went up.

I nodded and tried to look self-conscious. "It happened six weeks ago, and that was when my life's mission was revealed."

"How legal is this one, Eeps? Let's see, what was your last scam? Trying to sell the Ecuadorians electronic stud-finders under the pretext that they were mine detectors?"

I ignored her sarcasm. "I was out one day immersing myself in nature, and I realized that I was going to die like everyone else. I saw myself crōaked out, in a box, and worms—" I broke off from an excess of feeling.

"What's that in your hand — a Ramos fizz?"

"Well, I feel better now, but I realized that the universe is matter and mechanics, you know? We're not spirits in a material world; we're material in a material world."

She gazed at me about two seconds and said, "I'll be back in a week. Her stuff is in this bag, along with any phone numbers you'll need."

"I'm quiet," the kid said. "Most of the time. What's that funny noise, Mommy?"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I felt like grabbing my head and pulling on my hair. "I'm deeply into a religious exercise here. I got things on my mind. I got deliveries coming in."

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"Just assure me you'll stay out of jail till I get back. And what *is* that smell? What are you doing in there, Eeps?"

"I evaluate products, that's all. I test things, write a few articles, and get to keep the merchandise. Zuze, let me off the hook this time, and we could go to the Bahamas this winter; what do you say?"

"I say I'll be back in a week."

"Jeez, Zuze, you're putting a crimp in my freedom to profit from religion. I don't know where she could sleep — the spare room is filled up with wide-screen TVs. And I've got this problem with the wind blowing through the walls. . . ." I hoped I looked desperate.

"Not to mention the stink."

The kid swung her ratty doll. "Something smells funny in there, Mommy."

"Who is this child that keeps calling you 'Mommy'?"

"She's my daughter."

"My name's Johanna," the kid said. She was craning her head to see behind me into the house.

"Daughter? You didn't have a daughter the last time we, um, the last time."

"I'm adopted," Johanna said.

"Eeps, this is somewhat urgent," Zuzanna said. "The company hasn't had time to take into account that I'm a new mother, and they're sending me on assignment for a week — and where I'm going wouldn't be a good place for her to be."

"Delivering antiaircraft missiles to Paraguayan rebels again?"

"Don't be cranky, Eeps. We could be going together, like in the old days, if you hadn't arranged that aquatic speed test on their Jeeps."

"It was a joke. They shouldn't have taken it seriously."

"Paraguayan police have no sense of humor, Eeps. They take everything seriously."

"I found that out." The kid kept looking at me. "You could've at least called beforehand," I said.

"And give you time to get out of town?" Now *she* was trying to look around me. "What *is* going on in your house, Eeps?"

"I don't even know what kids eat. Or when they go to bed. Do you really think I'm a good role model for an impressionable child? I've got serious personality problems."

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"Only when they're convenient." Zuzanna handed me the kid's bag. "The phone numbers are inside. Seven days isn't such a long time. She's good company. Eeps, is something burning in your house?"

"No, it's this computer line from India. They get hot and smell like cow dung."

She closed her eyes for a second and shook her head. Then she gave Johanna a long hug and several kisses and waved good-bye to both of us.

I went back inside the house, but the kid was hanging back. "What's the matter?"

"It sounds like ghosts in there," she mumbled.

"Take it from me — there are no such things as ghosts. I've got some wind blowing up through the walls, or vibrating water pipes, or something. Don't worry about it."

"It smells funny, too."

"Well, then you can sleep here on the front step if you want."

"I'll come in."

"Good. Don't trip on the cables."

"Gosh," she said, "how many TV sets do you have?" She stood in the middle of the room and did a slow turn. "It's neat with everything turned on, Mr. Eeps. What are those things?"

"These are computer monitors. The TVs are in the back rooms. Stereos are in the kitchen, those are signal generators, spare amplifiers in the corner, other things. A lot of this stuff is a mystery to me. Electric keyboards, synthesizers, rhythm modules — those are in the den. I've got everything turned on so I can spot the defective merchandise. You like music? You listen to Muppet music or something? If you do, I don't have any."

"I like Rolling Stones," she said.

I took a second look at her. "Rolling Stones? Where are you from, anyway?"

"They found me in Scranton. In a garbage can. Then I lived in foster homes. Can I have some cereal? I won't eat very much."

She asked me if I'd mind playing "Mona" while she ate, and she mumbled the words while she crunched up half a box of Grape-Nuts. The kid was a connoisseur of fine music.

Toward the end of the song, she paused, listened, and said, "Sounds funny."

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"Yeah. I've got everything hooked into this black box that smells like cow manure, and the past few days some of this stuff isn't working so well. I think the people who made that thing must be a bunch of ignoroids."

"What's an ignoroid?" A few Grape-Nuts fell out of her mouth.

"Something between a lawyer and a human being."

She nodded. Molding a child's mind is a wonderful thing. "Let me tell you about lawyers," I said. She listened carefully, and then I discussed doctors and the profit motive in the treatment of disease. I began to think we might get on quite well.

WHILE THE kid watched TV in the back room, I thought I'd see about disconnecting the GED stenchorama unit. General Electrozoidal Dynamics was a San Jose–New Delhi company that claimed in its brochure that its products would set a new standard for "integrated mind/body electronic experiences with the *ULTRA ELECTRI-CORTICAL* All-Unit Integrator." I would suggest that on the next model, they build in an air-purifying unit.

But it looked good — a football-shaped thing with lots of brushed stainless steel, colored-light indicators, and switches that had that slow, viscous feel, like something inside was easing through flesh.

The GED brochure used a lot of exclamation marks, boldface print, italics, and had happy women in bikinis pointing to its controls. The claim was that it would eliminate "modern-day *electronic confusion*," which, with my house stacked to the rafters, was something I badly needed. The problem was even getting at some of the stuff — there was so much of it. And it was imperative here to sort out the primo merchandise from the transistorized dogmeat before I left the country. The Electrozoid Odorama Integrator had sounded like a promising place to start. So, with a list price of $2,999.95, I suggested they let me evaluate it.

I figured by the end of the week, I'd write one generic article on one of the word processors and then fill in the blanks with specifics for each of the products. Then, before any of the companies could register any dissatisfaction, I'd have unloaded what I didn't want on my airport contact and hours later would be vacationing somewhere in the Caribbean on the Vesco Islands. Religion had changed my life.

. . . I visualized a winter home in Arizona, monadnocks blooming in the distance, fifteen hundred watts of Rolling Stones hitting me from all

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sides, and the sexy Massinex/Mainline voice module asking me, "Would you like your coffee now, Sebastian, or after I make your reservation to Athens?"

The specs on the thing were a little weird, filled with misprints and numerous parenthetical explanations in Hindi. The power supply, instead of drawing one or two hundred watts, pulled a microscopic point two watt. And instead of using some familiar-sounding integrated chip, it used something called a Vishnuzoid 3.

All I had had to do was connect everything — and they emphasized "*EVERYTHING!*" — to the soft-port sockets, and it would do the rest. Seemed like a sensible thing to try, since I had about ninety-five various stereos, computers, TVs, and microwaves waiting to be tested.

The thing had eight foldout arms that had strips of gray puttylike material running down their centers. It said to plug "*EVERYTHING!*" into it, and that's what I'd done. It seemed too simple, but who am I to question the best minds in San Jose and New Delhi, so long as I have reservations at the Milhous Racquet Resort? Unfortunately, the house now smelled like a cow stall.

While the kid was in the back room watching one of the ninety-inch TVs, I decided to disconnect the Electrozoid Ultra-Cortico Odor Emitter, but on the side next to the switch was a tiny sticker I hadn't seen before that said, "During break-in period, mechanism may emit heat and odor. Avoid excessive on and off usage." Hell with it, I thought. I'd lived with worse things than stink.

Johanna ambled out of the back of the house carrying that rag thing of hers. "I don't want to watch TV anymore," she said. She swung her doll listlessly at her side and gazed at my knees.

"'Ozzie and Harriet' reruns are on in ten minutes."

"The walls are making too much noise."

"Play outside."

"I'm not allowed to play in the dark."

"You aren't? I played in the dark all the time when I was a kid. Some of my best times, I played in the dark."

She squinted her eyes as she looked up at me, still swinging her doll. "Mr. Eeps, you know any magic tricks?"

"Magic tricks?"

"My mom says you know more tricks than anyone. Could you show me some?"

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"Sure, I know all kinds of tricks, but they're not magic. They're just tricks. After we eat dinner, I'll amaze you for a while."

Her eyes brightened up, and she grinned and said, "O.K.!" Then the grin faded. "Mom says you eat funny stuff."

"She does, huh? Tonight I was going to have pâté. Pâté is the meat of kings, of royalty. I knew a queen once that ate pâté three times a day."

"Really? You knew a queen?"

"I've known five or six of them. Not intimately, of course."

Her eyes glowed with wonder. Then, "Mr. Eeps," she said soberly, "do you have any macaroni? I think I'd just like to have some macaroni. I won't eat very much."

"Macaroni? Sure. Actually, many queens love macaroni."

She got her jacket out of her bag and informed me that it was her cape. She wore it royally and ate her macaroni with elegance.

The after-dinner magic tricks went unevenly. On the third try when I guessed the card she had picked, she managed to look impressed. By then she wasn't paying too much attention, so I got a nickel out of her ear. It impressed her more when I gave it to her. So much for the magic tricks. Besides, everything's all matter and mechanics, and it wouldn't do her any good to believe in magic. I didn't want the kid to grow up and be a slant-head who hired people like me to drive demon puppies out of her house.

I thought about messing around with some of the equipment after she went to bed, but sitting there with the room stacked to the ceiling and the pipes moaning in the walls and the room dense with the stench of baking cow dung was kind of depressing. It even made me a bit nostalgic for the days when Zuze and I used to sit back and drink white rum and watch the Paraguayan secret police turn each other in.

I found an old book of magic tricks in one of the closets, and boned up on a couple of the simpler ones so I could impress the kid tomorrow.

I went to sleep thinking about playing tennis in the Caribbean, but . . . I don't know. Some of the glow was gone.

Toward morning she woke me up with bad-dream noises, and I went in to see her.

She was sitting in bed, her round cheeks flushed red and her eyes wide. "I dreamed of monsters," she said. "Big worm monsters that lived in the walls."

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"Don't let it get to you," I said, trying to be matter-of-fact and comforting. "Everyone has bad dreams. It's all matter and mechanics. Dreams are caused by random firing of neurons in the brain. Your brain's like a computer — if the junk isn't cleared out once in a while, it comes back on you right when you don't need it. If you didn't dream during the night, you'd dream during the day, while you're awake.

"Really?" She seemed interested in this. Leave it to a kid to be interested in the biochemistry of the brain.

"Really. One time I was drinking a lot of this medicine that kept me from dreaming for three weeks. Next thing I knew, this woman with a bird's head came to the door wanting to sell me a phone book, and when I said I already had one, she tried to peck me to death."

"Wow." She looked over at the wall next to her bed. "It was making a buzzing noise in there."

I went over and kicked the wall a few times. "Shut up in there!" I yelled at it. "That should do it."

"Thank you, Mr. Eeps."

The general stench in the house seemed a little stronger than usual, so I went into the living room. Jeez. I'd left everything turned on all night. The Massinex/Mainliners sat there droning in the morning light, and a dozen monitors were filled with flickering swirls of color. The place smelled like a swineherd's bunkhouse.

The Electrozoid unit was hot to the touch, and I thought about turning it off — but the threatening sticker warned me away from the switch.

Screw it, I thought. Let it cremate itself. It was free. I went to fix the kid some breakfast.

She didn't want any smoked oysters or brandied pears, so I made her some toast. She looked grumpy, so I sat down at the table with her and started shuffling the deck of cards.

She looked up once, and then studiously went back to her toast. Obviously, she was convinced she wouldn't be impressed.

"New tricks," I said.

"Mm."

"Pick a card."

She picked the nearest one.

"O.K., stick it back in anywhere."

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She put it back in. I did the special shuffle so her card would come out on top, but I goofed it.

This was going to cook me with her. I thought about going into a coughing fit, fall on the floor and win her sympathy that way, but this kid had probably used that trick herself. I went on with the trick. Maybe it would work. It wouldn't work. But maybe it would.

"O.K.," I said, fanning them across the table next to her plate. It was supposed to be the seventh card in. I counted over to it, and then nudged out number seven. "It's this one. Maybe."

She chewed her toast a few more times, and then reached over and turned the card over. Adios, self-respect, I thought.

She stopped chewing. "How'd you do that?" she said through chewed toast.

"It was a trick. Here, check this one out." She picked a card, and I picked one, and after I shuffled them, they came out side by side.

"Wow! Magic!"

"Nah, just a trick." I remembered another one, but not too clearly. "This one," I said, "I'm not too sure of. Let's see how it goes." I figured I could safely foul up a couple of them now that I'd had some success.

I shuffled, glanced at the bottom one, did a little clumsy sleight of hand, and then said, "Think of a color, red or black."

"Red."

"Hearts or diamonds?"

"I like diamonds," she said coyly, "like queens have."

I spread them out in front of her. "This probably won't work," I said. But it did. From the deuce up to the ace, the top thirteen were all the diamonds, in order. I was amazed. Only the top one was supposed to be some random diamond.

"Geee!"

"Pick a card," I said uneasily. She chose, looked at it, and then put it back into the deck. This time I shuffled the hell out of them, cut them six different ways, reshuffled, and then said, "It's the top card." It couldn't be the top card.

She pulled it off and turned it over. It was the top card. "Whee!" she shrieked. "Mr. Eeps! That's wonderful! How did you do that?"

"Are you putting me on?" I asked. "That couldn't have been the card you picked." But I could tell by the near-tears look on her face that it was.

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"Never mind," I said. "I must be better than I thought."

"It really was the card I picked."

"Yeah. You go get some play clothes on. Maybe we can do some other tricks later."

SINCE IT wasn't raining, I made her go play outside for a while. I tried to get one of the Massinex/Mainliners to do something, but my heart wasn't in it. The screens kept giving me random flashes of color and error/overload messages. If the things didn't have missile trajectories or subatomic-particle tracks to plot, they just sat there and droned.

I kept thinking about those cards. By 11:00 A.M. I'd decided the kid was just trying to make me feel good by saying that last trick worked when it didn't.

In the back of a closet, I had some silks and fold-up flowers from when I was a kid. I got them out and made a few practice runs. The paper flowers were in pretty bad shape, but they still popped open when they came out of my sleeve. I figured I'd save these to do before she went to bed.

"Whatcha doin', Mr. Eeps?"

"Why are you creeping around like that?"

"I slammed the door. I thought you'd want to yell at me for doing it. My new mom does. Is that a new trick? May I see it, please, sir?"

"Well. . . . O.K. Look — an ordinary handkerchief."

"It looks like silk to me."

"Yeah, yeah, it's an ordinary silk handkerchief. Like queens have. Empty hands, ordinary queen's handkerchief. Say 'Viola.'"

"Viola!" she squealed.

I whipped off the handkerchief, and the flowers. . . .

"Oh Mr. *Eeps!*" She was clapping her hands.

The flowers were real. Real roses. Lavender and crimson roses that smelled like a woman I met once in Prague.

"May I have them?" she said hopefully. I handed them over. "Can you make other things come out of the handkerchief?"

I looked up my sleeve. The paper flowers were gone. "That's all I can do with the handkerchief. I don't know any more tricks with it."

"What about. . . ." She pressed her lips tight together. "Maybe you could just try, O.K.? Maybe you could try to get a *doll!* A doll with red hair?"

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I laid the handkerchief over my hand and reached under it and into my sleeve. There was something in there, but it was too small to be a doll . . . until I started pulling on it.

The thing was a foot long, had red yarn hair and a little blue-and-white checkered dress. This was getting too weird. But the source of the weirdness was matter and mechanics. That was one thing I had on good authority., Maybe the handkerchief . . . or maybe my sleeve. . . . Whatever, there was an explanation based on matter and mechanics.

Johanna was jumping up and down. "Mr. *Eeps!* Mr. *Eeps!*"

"I need to take a little break," I said. "I need a drink."

"Get one out of the hankie."

I looked at her very carefully. Either this child had supernatural contacts, or we shared the same hallucination. I draped the silk over my hand, and when she squealed, "Violà." and clapped her hands, I felt something very cold balancing on my fingertips. It was a triple Ramos with perfect color.

And perfect taste.

"Could I have a Coke, please, Mr. Eeps? Just a small one would be O.K."

I heard myself muttering. I was getting the creeps. I held the handkerchief over my hand again, she said the word, and there it was — a Coca-Cola in a quart cup. I was creeped out by a quart of Coke. "Is this all right?" I croaked.

"Oh yes, Mr. Eeps. Thank you." She took it in both hands.

"Go watch some TV," I told her. "I need to study up on a couple more of these special effects." She smooth-stepped out of the room, holding the Coke in one hand and the red-haired doll in the other.

Something was happening here, and I didn't know what it was. For starters, since I wasn't consciously doing tricks, and magic didn't figure in my worldview, either someone else was doing this to me, or I had become insane since breakfast.

Since Zuzanna had said suspiciously little about what her assignment was, perhaps she had been paid by some demonic agency to turn against me. . . . The Paraguayans were capable of this kind of thing, even to the extent of enlisting an orphan child to put psychotropic drugs in my food. Perhaps this went as far back as that spasmo mockingbird — it could have been a mechanical device built by one of those organ-eating Nazi offspring down there still looking for someone to turn their revenge on. Those

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Paraguayans.... If I tried to tell anyone about them, I'd be on a Thorazine-enhanced diet in a matter of hours.

And there was still the possibility that I *was* insane. Long ago my mother had told me that if I ever worked for the government, I would either go blind or mad, because government was nothing more than institutionalized self-abuse on a national scale.

I looked at the fine print on the face of my wristwatch — at least I wasn't going blind. I'd have a 20/20 view of myself when I decided to hide in a closet and drool in my shoe.

Rational thought was upsetting me. It rarely solved my problems and usually only spooked me more. Maybe it was time to do something. I was trying to remember where I'd put the ticket to the Vesco Island, when Johanna came in looking puzzled.

"Mr. Eeps? I can't get anything on the TV except monsters."

"Good, fine."

She looked at me a second, shrugged, and went back.

O.K., I couldn't run away just yet, because the kid was here. So either I'd blown my cortex, or someone was doing this to me. Real things didn't just *appear* out of nowhere. That would be magic, and I'd be right back in with demon puppies and Satanic messages in shoe ads.... No way. Even madness was a step up from that. If my mind was gone, then everything was hopeless, and there was nothing I could do about it — so that possibility could temporarily be ignored. But if it was those Paraguayans —

"Mr. Eeps?"

The kid again.

"Mr. Eeps, the monsters want to talk to you."

"Tell them I'm busy." She left.

One interesting possibility, however, would be to get thoroughly into this situation and see what developed. If I was insane, well, I might as well explore the situation before it explored me. And if I was being psychologically brutalized by some foreign police agency of glue-sniffing Nazis, then pretending that the situation was normal would be just what they wouldn't know how to handle. I would see just what they were capable of. I got the tablecloth off the table. "Johanna!"

She reappeared carrying her new doll. "Yes, Mr. Eeps?"

"Let's get crazy."

"O.K.!"

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"Have a seat. How would you like a bicycle?"

Her jaw dropped open.

I flapped the tablecloth around. "Say the magic word!"

"Viola," she squeaked.

From beneath the tablecloth dropped a midget-sized ten-speed, metallic pink with daisy decals on the fenders. It wobbled over on its side and banged down on the floor.

She held her little round cheeks with her hands. "What I always wanted, Mr. Eeps!" She leaped up from her chair and hugged my legs. "Oh Mr. Eeps!"

"Only the beginning," I said. "Let's work this thing. How about—"

"A big fluffy cat?" she asked. A good idea. Asking for a live animal might throw off whoever was behind this. "Viola!" she said breathlessly, and a twenty-pounder, gray with black stripes, dropped out of the tablecloth and hit the floor purring. She gathered it up in her arms and looked at me like I'd never been looked at before. "How did you know, Mr. Eeps?"

"I'm a professional," I said. "How about—" Yes, I thought. Now I had it. "How about our weight in small, unmarked bills?"

She shrugged and kept petting the cat. "Sure. Viola!"

Packets tumbled out of the tablecloth and buried most of the bike. This was exciting.

"Let's do that again," I said. "I don't think I worked it quite right. I meant to say, 'Our weight in used, unmarked, nonsequential hundreds.'"

"O.K. Viola!"

Hundreds of packets of bills fell out, and I was buried up to my knees. I was wealthy. I was ridiculously wealthy — and perhaps marked for death by Paraguayan hit squads. Or was I hopelessly insane? That possibility seemed more and more likely.

"Could my kitty have some milk, please, Mr. Eeps? I don't think he'll drink very much."

"Milk? No problem." I used the handkerchief. Then: "How about lunch? A few hamburgers — with cheese. Maybe some fries on the side — extra crisp."

"That would be real nice, Mr. Eeps."

"And silver plates to eat them from. And a pint of Guinness. And a centerpiece made of thousand-dollar bills, delicately folded into flowers."

"Oh yes, Mr. Eeps, I like flowers. Queens have flowers on *their* tables."

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We had lunch, and while we ate, I was once again seized by an uncomfortable rational thought. It was quite weird that after my mystical experience — which denied that there were mystical experiences — I should find my materialistic cravings being satisfied through something that looked very much like magic. Still, I could see only the one thing to do. Like my mother told me, whatever I did, do it well. So I was going to whip this situation for everything I could get out of it.

Then, after clearing the money out of the middle of the floor, we sat around the rest of the afternoon with her slumbering cat, making things appear and vanish. Monkeys, parrots, a miniature gorilla with foul personal habits, a swarm of six-inch butterflies, orchids for the end tables; and I brought back the Durango Kid and Lash LaRue from the fifties and showed her what real heroes were like.

"If your heart is pure," said the Kid, all black leather and silver studs, "you'll fear no evil."

Lash showed us some fancy whipwork and snapped the petals off the orchids, one by one. Johanna loved the black clothes and whips and leather. Some kids just start out with good taste.

I put a metallic midnight-blue Maserati in the garage next to a black 1937 Frazier-Nash with a 420 Chrysler under its coffinlike hood. The cars appeared from under the tablecloth like billows of smoke that solidified into beauty and steel. I could feel my heart pound in my ears. The obvious conclusion was that I was insane.

Johanna had hot dogs for dinner, and I had caviar, pâté, and high-intensity chocolates for dessert. I materialized some tuna filet for the cat, but it sat there staring at me till I could conjure up something it liked. It liked bell peppers. Odd cat.

I called up Cleopatra to belly-dance for us, to help our digestion. Why not? Let me tell you, she was not the modern standard of beauty. She had a receding chin, steel wool in her armpits, and she smelled bad. Johanna looked reproachfully at me once we caught wind of her, and I sent her back.

By six we were both exhausted, so she went in to watch a little TV while I shoveled some of the bucks out of the closet and did some counting.

But she came back after ten minutes. "Mr. Eeps? Those monsters are still on TV, and they said they still wanted to talk to you."

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"Tell 'em I'm insane and have to count my money."

"O.K." And she went back to her room, and I heard her passing on my message. She was a good kid. Her imagination was a bit on the uncontrolled side, I thought, as I hovered there on my hands and knees, up to my elbows in bushels of money, but who was I to criticize? If I weren't bats now, I soon could be. I had enough bucks here to indulge every bad habit I'd ever thought of having. With this much cash, I could permanently damage myself.

"They still want to talk to you, sir," she said from the doorway.

". . . hundred sixty-seven, hundred seventy-six. . . . Jeez, Johanna, now I have to start over. *You* talk to the beasts."

She left, and I pulled a sheet of paper and pen out of the endless handkerchief and started with the hash marks. Then, if she came back—

"They say they're stuck, sir." She must have known I was getting a little edgy, because she hung back in the hallway when she talked.

"Look, if you want to come in here and play with your dolls or your cat, that's fine, but you can stop with the monster stuff. You want more things? How about another doll? How about a family of dolls? Fifteen or twenty of them?"

"They say they want you to, um, something about the field. So they can go away. Right now they're stuck here."

"I'm done making ghosts disappear. If they're stuck, fine, they can stay stuck."

She looked at me a second and then left. Finally, I got some serious counting done. If I had gone psycho, I had gone far enough to think I had just short of 2.3 million bucks. I felt good. I felt way good.

Around ten, while the mockingbirds chortled and squawked outside in the wisteria, I tucked Johanna into bed. She'd named the cat Scruff, and he stretched himself out next to her, his chin on her arm.

"There really were monsters on TV, Mr. Eeps."

"If Scruff is going to sleep in here, I'll materialize a litter box for him."

"Thank you for all the stuff you gave me, Mr. Eeps. I liked the tricks. I like my Scruff the best."

"Good night, kid. Who knows what tomorrow will bring."

I went into my bedroom and moved aside some of the microwaves and hologram cameras and readied the tablecloth. Cleopatra hadn't been so interesting, but ever since dinner, I'd been thinking of Silvya Romilar, the

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comatose actress, idol of millions, who lay on display down in Hollywood. I'd seen her once, lying there under the plastic bubble in a white wedding dress, breathing ever so slowly. . . .

I brought her back, awake and alert. Hello, Eeps," she said in a voice that could make men die. "Busy for the next couple of hours?"

When I finally went to sleep, I dropped off immediately, despite the moaning in the walls, and began dreaming that the wiring in the house had begun to glow, and I could see it through the plaster. Every cable and every filament turned orange and then yellow. The nails in the framing glowed red, and just as the light began seeping into all the electronic equipment in the house, I heard Johanna down the hallway, making little frightened noises.

I had that instant of relief when I opened my eyes, glad to be awake in my own bed instead of stuck in a nightmare.

I didn't need to turn on the lights. All the wiring in the house was incandescent. Every stereo and computer and microwave glowed orange and was beginning to turn yellow. The nails in the walls made a skeletal pattern of red dots.

"Mr. Eeps! Mr. Eeps!"

I ran down the hall to get the kid out of the house in case it all went up in flames, but halfway there, I realized the house was cold as a refrigerator, and that even in the orange light of the house, I could see my breath. My flesh crept.

She was sitting up in bed, clutching the cat to her, and pointing at one of the ninety-inch televisions.

"Something in there!" she chattered, her teeth rattling from the cold. "A monster!"

The screen blazed white, too bright for any kind of ordinary transmission. Just as I was thinking that it could be another electronic screwup, something swirled in the whiteness; a slit of black formed, like the darkness between two invisible lips. And then it spoke.

"*Let us go home,*" it said in a raspy electronic moan.

"I'm scared," Johanna whined.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "Sunrise Collection Associates? I paid you guys off last month. The Paraguayan Research Agency? Get off my case."

"We're stuck here," the mouth slit said from the middle of the screen, from the blaze of white. "We don't know where we are. . . ." The sound

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faded out a little, and the glowing wires of the house dimmed down to orange. Then it all came back full power. ". . . from your past or your present," the voice rasped. "We don't know where we are."

"Who do you think you're dealing with here?" I demanded. "An amateur? Don't let this worry you," I said to Johanna. "I'm a professional."

"Deactivate your power field," the thing said. "A chronoplastic anomaly has disoriented our. . . ." More static and dimmer lights — but it came back again with a vengeance. "We're trapped here. . . . We're lost."

"I'm bleeding inside," I said. "What's in it for me?"

The mouth slit seemed to lick its chops. "You get to keep what we sent you."

"I want to keep my Scruff," Johanna quickly said from behind me.

And I wanted to keep the cars, the money, the memory of Silvya Romilar. "O.K., guys. What plugs do I pull first?"

". . . doesn't matter. . . . Deactivate your power field."

I dragged Johanna outside to the back corner of the house where the circuit breakers were, and her cat followed along with us like a dog. From the outside, the house looked pretty normal except for the weird glowing through the walls like its skeleton was showing.

The circuit box itself looked like a Mexican fiesta, with rainbows of electrical auras flashing around in it. Above it, I could see the little wheel with the black strip on it doing about 2,500 RPM.

"All I do is throw this switch," I said to Johanna, "and everything will be just fine."

I snapped it over, and every window in the house was sucked in and shattered to grit and sprayed across everything. The *fwunk* popped out my eardrums, and around the neighborhood I heard the *blamming* of exploding transformers high on the telephone poles. Over the house, like a huge bubble, an electric-blue discharge jittered, expanded, and was gone.

Then, through the ringing in my head, I heard the sirens start up.

The workmen were putting in the last of the front windows when Zuzanna drove up a few days later. The mockingbird in the wisteria made whooping sounds at Scruff, who sat in the middle of the yard and watched the men set the glass in the frame.

"New cat?" Zuze said to me. Johanna had been clutching her legs, but pulled back enough to say, "*My* cat. His name's Scruff."

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Zuzanna nodded appreciatively. "He looks healthy and well fed."

"Extremely healthy," I agreed. "Welcome back. Come on in and have a Ramos."

"Mommy," Johanna whispered, "we have a secret."

Zuze looked doubtful. . . . Then she looked at the workmen and the burn marks on the house. "Oh my God, honey, are you all right? Was there a fire?"

"I'm O.K., Mommy. Mommy," Johanna whispered, "we had monsters in the walls, and Scruff is *electric*."

Zuzanna was not amused. "You've made her like you, Eeps. Jesus, in only a week you made her like you." She was shaking her head. "Well. . . ." She paused a long time. "I shouldn't be surprised."

"What do you mean, because she's my kid?"

Zuzanna nodded.

"I figured as much. I could tell, you know, because she has a certain instinctive appreciation for the finer things in life. Zuze," I said, "come on inside, and let's talk about our trip to Nassau. And let me show you what's in my closet. And then let's talk about our trip to Crete. In fact, let's talk about Beijing and Singapore."

After I'd got the cops out of the house the other night and had settled my nerves by handling the money for a while, I discovered that most of it was dated twenty or thirty years in the future, but enough was current that we could spend the rest of the summer in Mongolia if we wanted.

"Singapore?" she said. "What have you done now, Eeps?"

"Tahiti?" I said. "Tasmania? Galápagos?"

One of the workmen was waving at me. "Mister, hey! That cat's making us nervous looking at us like that. Could you, you know, move him or something?"

Scruff hummed up alongside us. Everything about him was authentic except his diesel purr. And his rudimentary ability to understand English.

"Scruff eats vegetables, Mommy."

"Eeps," Zuzanna said, "everything around you goes weird."

"But no matter how weird it gets," I said, "it's all just matter and mechanics. Believe me."

"It is, Mommy," Johanna said. "We had moaning in the walls, and we thought it was the Paraguayans, but it was a chronoplastic anomaly, and—"

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I nudged her and nodded at the workmen.

Zuzanna looked at Johanna and then at Scruff and then at the burn marks across the front of the house. "Eeps. . . . O.K. O.K., I'll have a Ramos." And she stepped inside.

Zuzanna Pitkowski was the particular configuration of matter and mechanics that appealed to my spiritual nature, which, of course, is determined by an arrangement of neurons between the cortex and the limbic system. And life was getting more interesting every day.

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*Ronald Anthony Cross's last story here was "The Country Store" (October 1988; his novel, PRISONERS OF PARADISE, was recently published by Watts. His new story is about an ordinary guy named Herman and his extraordinary experiences with the ultimate in biofeedback games.*

# Hermes and the Magic Helmet

**By Ronald Anthony Cross**

I

LATER ON, WHEN it was all over, when he had all eternity to think about it, it would come home to Herman how ironic it was that it should be his neighbor George who had suggested the game to him.

"It's the latest in biofeedback games, see? I tell you it's fantastic! A combo of hologram projections and sensory stimulus: but gradually it charts the neural pathways you're using, and somehow it learns how to stimulate them, see? I don't know how to describe it, but it's great. You get more and more into it all the time.

"You ought to get this Chucky Chicken game like I got. Hey, that Chucky's funny. He's real fierce. Loves to peck them funny little alligators. It's got a sense of humor, you know, unlike yer Swords and Rockets, or yer pirate games. Humor, that's what I like, you know?"

Herman knew. He did not like George at all. Herman thought of him-

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self as an aristocrat and George as a commoner. It had always irked him that George and he both had the same job with the same firm. And in fact, though he hated to admit it, George was slightly higher up the ladder than Herm. Maybe half a rung. Well — maybe a whole rung. Everybody seemed to like big, happy teddy-bear George. Though Herm could never figure out why.

So, Herm had always made it a point to ignore all of George's recommendations up to now. But in this case, something about the idea of the game creating itself with the help of his own brain cells appealed to Herman. Perhaps I'll get Swords and Rockets, or one of the ones George doesn't recommend, he thought happily. At least it's bound to be better than Chucky Chicken. I can always point that out to George. On that note, Herman resolved to spring the big bucks for the Helmetron.

II

HERMAN SHOULD have felt a sense of relief at being outside at last, but somehow he didn't feel much of anything. And he wondered why. After all, day over, work over, and now — outside, free, right?

Then he experienced, in a rare burst of clarity, the answer. The very unpleasant answer.

It was because the outside was just like the fucking inside. A bunch of guys carrying briefcases, darting around stiffly but quickly. Definitely quickly. Like mechanical men wound up too tight.

And of course, everything was covered with concrete. For the first time, Herman was aware of the full impact of this tragic fact: that man had poured an ocean of dull gray concrete over the green and growing things, over the rich brown earth. Man forced himself to live in a dull gray unyielding world of his own creation. And to protect himself from the stuff, he wore shoes. Didn't some Zen master once say that if a man wore shoes, his feet experienced the whole world as leather? Something like that. Well, better leather than concrete, he figured.

And the real tragedy, the one that added the insult to the injury, was that as he was realizing all this, Herman himself was carrying a briefcase and rushing to the monorail platform with the same half-nervous, half-angry expression as everyone else. Wearing a gray suit like many of

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the others (some chose navy blue or black), so that all of them added the decorative touch of ashes among the concrete.

Even the air didn't smell like outdoors air, but like machines and burnt plastic.

And even later, riding home on the rail, whistling along above the streets, it stayed with him: that we had created a world of concrete and forced ourselves to live in it. How terrible that was.

But by the time he got to his condo apartment and turned on the 3V wall, and smelled the homey odor of the auto-oven cooking his dinner, the image had begun to fade: he still remembered having had the thought, but it seemed insignificant to him now. After all, here I am, he thought.

"Got your new game today, hon," Marge said from the kitchen, where she was busily programming next month's menus into the computer. Marge never felt right unless she had every meal planned out and ready to go for at least two months in advance. That was one of the things Herman liked about her: she was a woman who got things done.

"Should let me help you out, Marge," he protested weakly.

"No problem," Marge said. "I enjoy it."

And she did. She could easily have worked a full-time job — Habers, her boss at Webblies, had many times begged her to extend her work for him to a full shift — but she loved organizing things around their condo. And Herman had to admit he did not find this unpleasant.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said to her as she came into the room, "how we've covered everything over with an ocean of concrete?"

"No," she said, smiling. "Aren't you excited about the game?"

And here two things happened at once to Herman: 1) Yes, he was excited about the game, and did want to think about it, actually could not resist thinking about it; but 2) Something about the way she had dismissed his vision and actually led him away from it (carrot in front of jackass?) just absolutely infuriated him. For just a moment there, he had the terrifying thought that maybe he didn't really love Marge, or even maybe he didn't even like Marge, or even, maybe he hated Marge, or. . . . The game! The game! Think of the game.

"Sure, let me see it."

"What's wrong, hon?" Marge was genuinely concerned. "You look like something's bothering. . . ."

"Headache," Herman said, and it was true. Made in the image of God,

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first there was the word, and the word was without form, and the word was "headache." And the headache was! Ouch!

And now, with most of his concentration on the pain in his head, Herm found himself holding the helmet in his hands without remembering how it had got there. Must have been Marge, because she was standing there saying something about how maybe he ought to wait to try out the game when he felt better. And maybe he should take something for his headache.

"Put me on!"

Herman didn't know why that should frighten him. Certainly there was nothing mysterious in the technology that had created the voice. There were voices built into everything nowadays. All of the doors, windows, cars, and electronic devices talked to you; why not this?

Yet Herm felt a wave of deep foreboding even as he followed the orders.

"Now put on the hand control." The hand control was an on/off button sewn into the palm of a glovelike apparatus, apparently so you wouldn't let it drop off your hand if you got too involved in the game. You clenched your hand to turn the game on or off.

"Now sit down."

He sat down in his favorite squishy chair, peripherally aware that Marge was going on and on about his headache or something, but ignoring her.

She stalked out of the room.

"Now press the on button.

"The Helmetron Game is broken up into two stages.

"In the first stage, it will be necessary for you to sit and passively experience a set demonstration run through the first two levels of the game. This will serve two purposes: 1) It will allow you to familiarize yourself with the territory and the dangers it will hold for you, and 2) It will allow me to chart your neural pathways as they are formed while you are experiencing this demo. Later, through the miracle of biofeedback, you will be able to operate the game merely by traversing those same pathways: in short, remembering.

"Due to the advanced nature of the Helmetron, you will undoubtedly be able to operate the central character better than you can your own body. All this without the clumsy necessity of hand- or voice-operated directional controls. Only through Helmetron. . . ," etc. etc.

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Then the machine quickly ran him through the game. With stunning reality he raced through a meadow and was attacked by a pack of werewolves, which he fought with silver throwing daggers, through forests filled with assorted evil fantasy characters, and to a castle with the front door guarded by a dragon.

In the castle he fought his way from floor to floor until finally he reached the top floor, where the lovely princess, chained to a post, was guarded by the evil machine.

Next he was swept through Level II. This turned out to be a science fiction game wherein he manned a spaceship, now with the aid of the princess he had rescued and a weird crew of aliens, through various perilous situations to the final confrontation battle on the planet Kreegon.

Afterward he calmly took off the helmet and just sat there in his squishy chair, not talking or moving, not even really thinking. Just spaced-out. It had seemed so real!

"Must be pretty good," Marge was saying. "I tried to tell you dinner was ready a half hour ago. You know how miffed the oven gets when we ask it to keep dinner warm. It starts asking me why I didn't program it for 8:00 if we wanted to eat at 8:00. Then it gives me all kinds of instructions as if I never worked it before, and then it—"

"It's just a machine," Herman said, getting up and setting the Helmetron on the table near the squishy chair. "You know what? My headache's gone. What's for dinner? I'm starved."

I guess, Herman realized, that my imagination's confused my body into thinking that it actually went through all that exercise. My muscles even feel a little sore. Probably was flexing them a little, automatically. It was so real! And once again he felt a brief rush of fear, only this time it was tempered with the desire to put the helmet back on again and play the game.

## III

EVEN THOUGH he still couldn't get used to the feeling, he had lost his life here many times before, and he knew it was no big deal. In fact, he had never got by here yet. Since the demonstration run, he had easily put together skills necessary to divert the pack of wolves, and kill whatever attacked him in the forest.

But here on the path to the castle, just after he had jumped the fire

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eruptions, over and over again he met his death at the hands of the blue imp.

And now, he realized as he edged closer to it, he was starting to choke.

There it sat — or squatted, rather — in front of him in the middle of the path, chuckling to itself. A huge, plump blue creature with a strangely Buddha-like smile. It was obvious to Herm that the imp had no doubts about who was going to win this fight. Great!

It would not attack him until he approached it, or threw daggers at it. At least, this had been the case in the past.

But Herman kept edging up, then backing off. I'm afraid of it, he realized. It doesn't make any sense. Why should I be afraid? But I am. I'll never get by here, no matter what I do. Never. I'll never win the game. What the hell's the matter with me?

He was aware of something moving in the bushes. What was this, something new to worry about?

Now she stood up. A slender young woman, dressed in a scanty harem-girl outfit, carrying a huge sword, sneaking up behind the blue imp. The princess! What the hell. . . ?

Without warning, she attacked the imp, striking it a blow on the head. The imp leaped high into the air and whirled around. It landed spinning like a top and knocked the princess over with its long blue tail.

Herm just stood there, stunned.

"Squawk, squawk, use your sword, you wimp." A giant cartoon chicken ran across the field toward them, waving its wings for speed, and jumped into the fray, all the time shouting, "Kill, puck puck, kill! Peck his balls off!" He was also promptly knocked over by the spinning, whirling imp.

"Stay out of this, Chucky," the imp shouted, "and you, too, you slut."

Herm came out of his daze, ran forward, dropped down to his knees, and swung his sword in a low arc; the imp's tail whipped over his head, just missing; then he felt the jar as his sword caught one of the imp's legs.

"That's the stuff," the princess shouted. "You take his legs; leave me his head."

"I've got his balls," the chicken shouted.

And sure enough, a few moments later and the blue imp was down on his back, separated from his legs and head, with the huge cartoon chicken pecking ferociously away at his genitals.

"Enough, Chucky, O.K., enough already," the princess shouted. "He's

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as dead as he's ever going to get, right?"

The ferocious chicken backed away from the bright blue corpse, clucking warily.

"Chucky Chicken, what are you doing here?" Herman suddenly remembered that it was his next-door neighbor who had bought the Chucky Chicken game.

"Oh, puck puck, just visiting."

"Chucky's so out of it, he doesn't even know what Helmetron set he belongs in, right, Chucky?" the princess said.

"I can go anywhere I want," Chucky said, "puck puck puck."

"Doesn't that remind you of something, all that 'puck pucking'?" the princess said. "You substitute an *f* for a *p*, right?"

Was it possible? She was taking off her little red vest.

"Puck puck puggette. Can I join in, puck puck, can I?"

"Get out of here, you nasty creep," the princess shouted. "Get back to your own game where you belong."

"Oh great," Chucky pouted, "I do all the fighting and don't get any of the rewards. O.K., O.K., I know when I'm not wanted."

"Fat chance," the princess shouted, as the chicken ran back across the field, flapping its wings like mad.

"I don't understand any of this," Herman said. "You're supposed to be chained up in the castle waiting for me to rescue you. Aren't you?"

She shrugged; she was topless now. And she was such a fox. Only a cartoon could look like that, Herman thought.

"Well . . . a girl gets tired of waiting around, right? So I got loose on my own and came back to help you out. After all, Herman, you're not exactly a whiz at Helmetron Swords and Rockets, right? I mean, being a virgin princess is all right for a little while, but . . . which reminds me —" She slid down her harem pantaloons. What verisimilitude, Herman thought, staring at her.

"Well, uh, we can't actually, er, do it, can we? I mean, it's only a game, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Herm, but, well, I'll fight off my natural shyness, and why don't we give it a try."

Herm touched her pert breasts; the sensation was incredibly real. A few moments later, and they were. . . !

"Dinnertime, Herm. And damn it, I'm tired of just sitting around while

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you play that damn game. You never talk to me anymore."

Herm sat there blinking and shaking. He and the princess had just been starting to — when Marge had depressed his hand control and turned off his helmet.

"Don't you ever do that again," Herm said in the nastiest tone of voice he had ever achieved. He was still shaking. "Never. Never. Never," he said.

Marge burst into tears. "Well, thanks a lot, Herman. All I ever ask out of you is a little attention. Thanks a lot, you self-centered bastard." She rushed out of the apartment, slamming the door.

Herm felt a wave of relief. Switched the helmet back on.

## IV

HERM SAW everything clearly: the wine here had no intoxicating effect on him; and, like the food, it tasted strange, like an inaccurate memory of itself.

But the wine certainly intoxicated the others: the sensual princess, the crazy chicken. Herman had gotten used to her going stark naked, but he would never never get used to that violent, sex-mad chicken. And worse luck, he could not seem to get rid of it, or him, or whatever. It didn't even belong in this game at all, Herm thought again and again; it belongs next door.

Of course, he-it was a big help in the battles. A raging, bloodthirsting, deranged giant chicken. Jesus! Thanks!!

And Herm couldn't get used to those long, drawn-out orgiastic interludes. Weren't you supposed to rush from room to room, killing all the evil supernatural creatures? But —

"Relax, for God's sake, hon. Have some wine, and let's get it on, right? We've got some celebrating to do. That's one very dead troll." She turned her head toward the corpse of the troll guardian. Chucky Chick was . . . was. . . .

Oh God. Herm turned away in disgust. On top of everything else, the crazy chicken was a necrophiliac. "Ha ha, wake up, little sleepyhead," he was crooning to the huge pink corpse of the troll as he . . . as he. . . .

And Herman couldn't get used to all the sex here. Or could he? It was a lot like the food: the sensations weren't quite real, more like memories of sex, and particularly the climaxes were — anticlimactic. And of course

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you weren't physically tired — so that if you wanted to, you could just go on and on with it. Which seemed to be all the princess wanted to do.

And now, gradually a pattern was emerging. Herm would put on the helmet, appear at whatever location he had last attained, and find the princess and, yes, usually that damn crazy chicken, waiting for him. The three of them would proceed to the next floor of the castle or whatever, and kill everything on it, culminating, of course, with the main guardian of the staircase to the next floor. A troll or dragon or some such. But with the knowledge the chicken and princess shared, it was always fairly easy to accomplish this.

Then they would eat all the food and drink all the booze on that level, and party, party, party.

"Um funky," the chicken muttered. It was now momentarily satiated, and drunk as a skunk, staggering over toward Herm and the princess on its long, scraggly chicken legs. The princess was tugging at Herm's belt, and chugalugging wine out of a delicate carafe at the same time.

"Kill, eat, drink, and screw — is that all there is?" Herm complained.

"Eww petulant squawk squawk." Chucky Chicken jumped back in exaggerated fear. "What's the matter, sweetheart, want some deep philosophy thrown in from time to time? Sure, why not?

"O.K. — 'To be, or not to be' — how's that? No, that's no good. Not for us. No choice, right? Just to be, if you want to look at it that way. But no choice in it. After all, we're only images in a game. Nothing's up to us."

Suddenly Herm felt a wave of panic. A huge tidal wave, building just off the shore of his consciousness. "Not me," he said.

"All of us, cutie," the chicken said, "so just eat, drink and be merry, right, princess?"

"You left out a good one, Chucky. Help me get these pants off him." The drunken princess lost her grip on Herman's belt and fell down on the hard floor, giggled "ouch" — although it didn't really hurt, more like a memory of hurt — and took another swig of wine, which she had miraculously held onto in her other hand. In fact, she hadn't spilled a drop.

"What the hell are you doing here, anyway, damn it? This is the wrong game. you're supposed to be next door at George's apartment," Herm shouted at the chicken.

"He never plays his game. He spends all of his damn time screwing your wife."

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"What?" Herm shouted incredulously.

"It's true," Chucky insisted. "What do you think she does all the time you're playing this game? She sneaks over next door and screws George's socks off. Marge, right? Kinda flat-chested, but still — kinky bitch. You ought to see what they're doing right now."

Herm frantically depressed the off button on the hand unit, and for the first time fully registered the shock of the sudden transition from the game back into the living room of his apartment. Marge, next door screwing George, or Chucky Chick the necrophiliac, and the nympho princess — which was real? He stood up and sat back down again. The room was spinning, spinning, and for a moment he almost depressed the on button and popped back into the castle with the princess. Marge, he thought; what do I care about Marge? Is Marge real?

She was! My God, she was real, and he had never understood this before. She had been like a figure in a dream to him. He couldn't even remember her face.

Suddenly he got his balance and jumped up. Took off the Helmetron.

"Marge?" No answer, of course. He knew that goddamned chicken was telling the truth. He felt the rage building up; it had always been there, just out of his perception. It was the rage he had been expressing playing the game. Only, now he had a target for it.

## V

EVEN THOUGH George was bigger and heavier than he was, Herm had no fear or doubt about how the fight would come out. He was too good at the game now, and this was the game.

Marge scrunched up naked on George's bed, just shaking and watching. "You bitch," Herm had shouted, bursting into the room. "You slut, you're just like the princess, only at least she doesn't pretend."

As the two men squared off, Herm remembered thinking, "This body is too small and stiff to operate at maximum fighting skill. I wish Chucky and the princess were here. We'd tear 'em to pieces and throw their bodies to Chucky."

But small and stiff as it was, Herm managed to maneuver it with something of the style and swiftness he had learned from the game. And, of course, he knew what to do. Ducking down under George's punch (poor

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naked George), he footswept his leg out from under him, and a few moments later and George was begging him, "Please, please, no more."

The strangest thing about all this was that Marge now wanted to go home with him. Something about having been won in a fight like a prize apparently appealed to her baser nature. She had no other, Herm figured.

"Just get your things the hell out of the apartment now and move in here with this pig. I don't ever want to see you again after tonight. And you, oaf, you keep your chicken out of my game."

And to their amazement, Herm stalked out, without explaining what he had meant by that.

## VI

THIS IS it, Lieutenant Vatch. This time we're going all the way."

"It's Captain, Hermes. Captain Vox."

Hermes reached out and tweaked his nose. "Wrong again, you chubby, four-armed freak. It's anything I want it to be. I run this game — right, Princess Pussy-Bitch?"

The naked princess, now part of the spaceship crew, wrinkled up her nose, but kept her sensual mouth closed. Herman was getting hard to live with. Beg your pardon, it was "Hermes" he demanded to be called nowadays. The fleet-footed messenger of the gods, or some such absurdity. Still — she had to admit it — he was really getting to be the boss, and it felt kind of, well, relaxing to have somebody else do all the thinking, make all the decisions.

But there were no more time-outs these days. After throwing out his wife, Herm had returned to the game with a new passion and sense of direction: he wanted to win. Bad! And the only orgies they were allowed were whatever they could grab between fights.

"Why can't we ever take a vacation?" the princess pouted, "It's just fight fight fight without any time for the finer things of life."

"And keep that chicken out of here," Herm tossed in.

"What chicken? Chucky hasn't been over for three days now."

Three days, Herm thought. Have I been playing this game for three days? He had a vague memory of phoning in sick to work. Had that been three days ago?

"Hermes," Captain Vag, or whatever his name was, shouted. "Up ahead,

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this looks like it. The final battle." Then the little four-armed bastard was manning the guns like an octopus.

"I almost wish that crazy chicken were here. He'd love this. We're going to tear them to pieces. There won't be enough left of them for even Chucky to love. It's *killing* time."

VII

GRAY GRAY gray. Had there ever been anything else but gray?

"I don't understand," he said. "This is the third level? What is it?"

"It's anything you make it," the princess said. "It's up to you. The machine understands you now. You and the machine are one."

But there was nothing. Just gray. With a sudden stab of fear, Hermes realized what it was. Mindstuff. It was his own mindstuff. He began to work with it. To form something. Just anything. To move the gray clouds around a little. The more he did it, the easier it became.

"Christ, I've got to get back. My body will die." Hermes tried to depress the hand-control on/off button. But he couldn't. Panicked. He tried again and again.

I'm too far gone. "I'll die," he said.

"You'll live forever," the princess said. "You'll form your own world here, and you'll live forever."

"I don't want to live forever," Hermes said. "Please, I don't want to live forever."

"Everybody wants to live forever," the princess said. And she was gone. And Hermes was alone in his own world. Forever.

VIII

THE PRINCESS looked at the body in the chair. Was it dead yet, she wondered? It was awfully still. She didn't really know what death was, so she couldn't tell.

She went over to the closet — sure enough, still a few of Marge's things in here. Ugly green dress. Too big. But it would have to do. She put it on. Stood in front of the mirror. It always amazed her how solid she was out here.

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Look at that, she thought. Who would ever realize that I'm nothing? Nothing but an image.

*An endless image, incomplete*
*Like ladies talking on the phone*
*Like top hat tumbling in the street*
*Alone alone alone alone*
*Alone alone alone alone.*

Who had written that poem? Hermes had once recited it to her. Some minor poet, no doubt. It described her, as he had pointed out. But it described him, too.

She went over and removed the game cartridge from the Helmetron. It was so tiny, yet infinite.

"Now you'll live forever," she said tenderly to it.

On the way out, she paused at George's — well, George's and Marge's — apartment. Some electronic ESP or something made her try the door. It was open. Chucky Chicken peeped out. His expression was sad, lugubrious.

"Are they in the game?" she asked him.

"No," he said, "something else is happening. Something we didn't plan on. The game leaked out somehow. All those little alligators got out. Ate 'em up. They're both dead in there. Dead and eaten." He looked frightened.

"Well, make yourself look human for a bit. We've got to take a mono ride." She watched in awed silence as the cartoon chicken electronically altered his form into a human one.

## IX

LISTEN," CHUCKY was saying to the Game Master, "we don't want thanks or rewards; we just want to get back into our worlds. It's ugly out here."

"Alligators and all?" the Game Master said. He was a powerful-looking man with a big, bushy mustache.

"Yeah, alligators and all," Chucky said. Princess nodded eagerly.

"Home, sweet home, huh? Sure, I got you. But first you just got to have a look at this."

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The Game Master plugged the cartridge into a Helmetron projector and punched up Level III.

Chucky and the princess gasped in unified astonishment. It was a projection of a world of ugly skyscrapers and gray concrete. Men in dark, colorless suits rushed about, all of them carrying briefcases.

"Level III?" the princess said.

"Level III. I wonder why?" the Game Master said.

Chucky Chicken went over and peeked out the window. "Same outside, same inside," he said.

And soon the Game Master had popped Chunky and the princess back into their own little worlds, where they lived forever, or not really at all, depending on how you look at it.

"I wonder what idiot will want to buy this game," the Game Master said aloud to no one in the empty room, thinking of the world that Herman had built. "But then again, this is the game we all bought." He shuddered. "Jesus," he said, "lighten up. Well — maybe I can sell it to Chucky and the princess for a change."

He had meant it as a joke. But it didn't make him laugh. Something about it was confusing.

"What the hell am I doing talking to an empty room, anyhow? Job's getting to me. Well, at least it doesn't answer." He filed away the cartridge with the others. Closed the door and went outside into the gray.

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# F&SF Competition

## REPORT ON COMPETITION 47

For Competition 47 you were asked to compose a personal ad for that lonely alien out there. There seem to be quite a few love-lorn aliens floating around the universe these days — judging from your entries. Some repeats, especially quite a number of arachnids filled with an "all-consuming love."

The winners:

### FIRST PRIZE

MATURE, SOPHISTICATED ALIEN RACE seeks long distance relationship through radio waves. Your frequency or mine, baby. Prime numbers/pictograms. Box SETI.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND seeks multiple free thinking females willing to teach me the meaning of being human. Eventual formation of own cult a possibility. If you're the right girl(s), I'm ready to be tripped. Send brief outline of personal philosophy, measurements to Box RAH.

MARS NEEDS WOMEN! Tall, short, fat, thin, blonde, brunette, redhead all acceptable. Box SOL4.

FRIENDLY, OUTGOING SPORE seeks warm, moist, stable environment for a relationship that can only deepen with time. Come on, give it a try, I'll grow on you. No letters, pictures required. Just wave it in the wind.

OUTGOING SCIENTISTS of all races seek understanding humans who don't mind a bit of poking, prodding, blood samples in pursuit of a good time. If you're willing to spend a few forgotten hours in the name of science, with an eye towards eventual hybridization, take exit 4 off route 101, park near the abandoned quarry and flash your lights. We'll be waiting.

Bruce Scanlon
Ann Arbor, MI

### SECOND PRIZE

EATBITEFUCKSUCKGOBBLENIBBLECHEW! You're a Transylvanian, I am too! Let's get together. Box 32445.

LUMP OF GELATINOUS PROTEIN, peace-loving but hungry, seeks self-destructive beings willing to undergo ingestion, digestion. Guaranteed painless. no silica-based life forms, please. Box 35566.

AUTOCANNIBAL seeks clone engineer. Must work fast. Box 12000.

YOU WERE UNDIFFERENTIATED SLIME; I was the membrane stretched over the sphincter portal on the shuttle. We exchanged pseudopodia. Now I can't reproduce (you sly devil, you!). Let's get together over a bottle of mucous and talk about it. Fax me at 566-090-142857.

Lee van Laer
New York, NY

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## RUNNERS UP

PURE INTELLECTS need love too! I'm tired of just THINKING about it. How about you? Send mental picture. Box MIT.

ENERGIZE ME! I've got the battery pods if you've got the acid glands. Wet cells are happy cells! Reply Box OY!

RED HOT DWARF really attracted to big stars. If you mass over $10^{27}$ tons, let's get binary! Main cycle only, please. Box M-9.

Michael Juergens
New Carlisle, OH

## HONORABLE MENTION

MENACE ANYONE? YOU MUST BE JOKING. This delightfully roly-poly, protoplasmic, polylingual Martian is looking for a Terrestrial body-and-soul mate. My pods may be pseudo, but my feelings aren't. Fully conversant with all forms of Earthian cultural endeavor. Nothing human is alien to *me*. Come for a romantic stroll along a red canal in the beautiful moonslight, as I stimulate your brain and other organs. Blush not, mon/ma petit(e). I will teach you the true meaning of foreign exchange. Sex, age, and appearance irrelevant; a sense of humor *sine qua non*. Transmit date of availability and title of favorite Marx Brothers' film. Cubicle DLX-9.

Charles Gregory
Tampa, FL

FORTY PERCENT MORE! Enlarged clone of Roy Smalley is dying to meet Jessica Hahn replication. Let's get together, spill a few beers, talk over somebody else's old times and see what happens. Send description of fondest desire to TWIN-7.

Mark Tuveson
Minneapolis, MN

FULLY AUTOMATED, plasma surfing cyber-dude would dig interfacing with fun-loving programmable Pleasure Droid. "Have hardware — will travel." VID/AMP. Sample. COMNET 41386.

David A. Smidt
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INTELLIGENT, STRONG, SENSITIVE CANINE PLUS who does not "run with the pack" seeks female of species. Must be tolerant of human voyeurs. Send scratch 'n' sniff. Code BLOOD OF PHOENIX.

John V.R. Williams
Gaithersburg, MD

ARE YOU LONELY? Telepathic intestinal fluke offers constant intelligent company.

F.L. Bass
Hattiesburg, MS

DOES anyone out there understand what a reputation for invulnerability does to a man? I give, give, give and they take, take, take. Well, I have needs, too. And my years with Lois have convinced me that humans are incapable of meeting them. So how about it, Centaurians — Rigelians — anyone? Want to straighten my cape? Mend my tights. Send photos. Clothes optional, it's all the same to me. I have X-ray vision. -S. Man, The Phone Booth, NY.

Patricia Warrick
Spangdahlem AB
West Germany

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## COMPETITION 48

You are invited to invent last lines for a horror, science fiction or fantasy movie. Examples:

> "Yes, but, when the sun sets, will the dying start again?"
>
> "The ring is returned to its rightful owner ... and Havorworld is safe once more! Princess, may I help you to your throne?"
>
> "He's dead. his body circles a cold, dim world ... out there. he gave up his life so that we could see Earth once more."

Please limit yourself to ten endings.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by May 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 48 will appear in the Sept. Issue.

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# Fantasy&ScienceFiction

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S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. Catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

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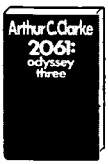


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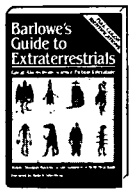


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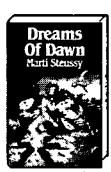


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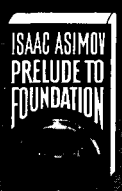

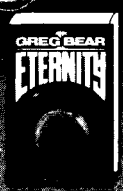

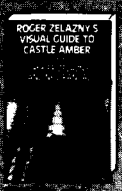

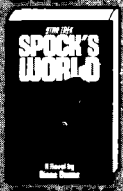


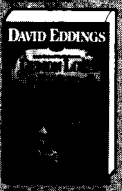

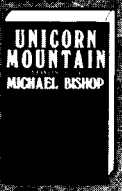


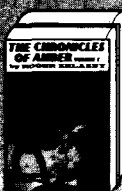

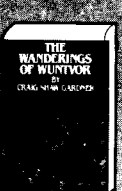

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